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OLD BULL'S-EYE, THE LIGHTNING SHOT of the PLAINS.

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CHAPTER I.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

"Go it, boots—lickety-split—an' I'll bet on the one that wins!"

These words dropped mechanically from the old man's lips as he leaned forward, his face glowing with eager interest, his small black eyes glittering curiously as they rested first upon the one, and then on the other of the contesting parties below.

"Lay down to it, ye varmints—stretch your legs an' sinners—do your level best, 'ca'se Old Bull's-Eye is a-watchin' of ye, ready to parse judgment on the feller what whips! Houp-lal! Sock in your rib-ticklers, limber up your raw-hides! Glory to Moses!—jest look at 'em! What on earth kin the critters be made of? They set thar like bumps on a log—a set o' dough boys 'd take more interest in the race than them fellers!"

This sentence was ended with a sniff of disgust, as though the speaker considered himself personally injured by the lack of interest displayed by the persons he was watching.

From the foot of the rocky range, extending even beyond the range of human vision, the level, sandy waste was guiltless of bush or tree, hih or dale, with naught to relieve the dull monotony save the shapes of half a score of horse-

men and their heavily-laboring animals. Full half an hour previously, the keen eye of the hunter had detected a faint dust-cloud in the distance, and knowing from experience that an honest man was far more likely to encounter enemies than friends in that portion of the desert, he had taken to the rock-cover, causing his well-trained horse to lie down behind a huge boulder while he, leaning against a gray rock, curiously watched the swelling dust-cloud.

He was not kept long in doubt. It was a stern, deadly race for life—two men fleeing from half a score. He saw one of the fugitives turn in the saddle and level a rifle. With the puff of light-blue smoke, he saw the foremost pursuer reel in his saddle, and then, convulsively clutching at his animal's neck, fall headlong beneath the trampling hoofs of his comrades' chargers. And a little cry of approval burst from the hunter's lips as he saw the other fugitive duplicate the performance.

"They're e'ena'most tuckered out—them hoss critters be. They'll knock under in 'bout three shakes, an' then thar's goin' to be some fun. Them little banties 'll fight—I reckon they're pluck clean through. They're makin' fer these rocks—then they'll turn to an' jest nat'ally shuck

out them copper imps ahind. Sha! I let 'em! Don't like to sp'ile sport, but I hain't had a turn-up fer most a week—gittin' rusty, I be so! Ge-thunder! looky yander!"

The fugitives were now within three hundred yards of the rocks, and were already disengaging their feet from the stirrups and looking to their weapons preparatory to leaping from their jaded animals the moment cover was reached, when a scattering volley from their pursuers precipitated the catastrophe. With a spasmodic leap, one of the fugitives' horses fell heavily to the ground. Its rider, though adroitly alighting upon his feet, stumbled and fell at full length. His companion, with true bravery, wheeled his trembling animal around and stood over his friend with leveled rifle.

"Up, Luis—up, and we'll show these devils what we're made of!" cried the young man, encouragingly. He had already given the Indians proof of his proficiency with the weapons he bore, and they visibly shrunk from charge.

ing up to its muzzle, though they did not fail to improve their advantage. As though by instinct, for certainly no directions were spoken, the party divided, at the same time each dusky warrior sunk down behind the body of his mustang.

The pale-faces saw and realized their danger, as the savages, four upon each side, swept around them, letting fly a cloud of arrows from beneath the necks of their ponies. The missiles fell wide of their mark, as might have been expected, but they were discharged simply to confuse the whites and prevent their making a steady shot. And then an exultant yell told that the red-skins had gained their main object. The fugitives were cut off from the rocks. This fight, if any, must be made out in the open desert. So reasoned the Indians.

It was the sight of the falling horse and rider that drew the abrupt exclamation from the hunter's lips, and showed him that there was no time to lose unless he wished to see the fugitives massacred by the exultant red-skins. Springing lightly back, he uttered a low cry that caused his crouching horse to rise upright, and scarce touching foot to stirrup, he vaulted into the saddle. The gallant gray scrambled over the loose rocks with the activity of a mountain goat and gained the edge of the desert just as the savages joined their forces again, between the fugitives and the cover they had so nearly reached.

"Cl'ar, the track thar fer the cavortin' chougur o' the Heely—hyar's the pole what rakes the persimmons!"

The wild yell was accompanied by a loud report. The hunter did not attempt to check his horse, but leveling his rifle with as much ease as though standing at rest, he sent a bullet crashing through the plumed skull of one of the Kiowas. Dropping the weapon across his saddle, where it hung by a stout strap to the high pommel, the hunter drew a revolver and dashed recklessly into the midst of the confused and bewildered red-skins, discharging bullet after bullet with wonderful rapidity and terrible accuracy.

Busied with their anticipated victims, the savages were taken completely by surprise, and almost ere they realized that they were attacked, full half their number cumbered the ground, either dead or dying. And then, deeming this mad rider but the advance of a strong force, the survivors, with yells of terror, sought to flee. But they had run their necks into a noose. Their animals were far too jaded to cope with the magnificent gray horse, their rifles were empty, and what could their feeble bows and arrows avail against this wonderfully-skilled marksman?

"Wake up thar, you boys!" shouted the hunter, as he swept past the two whites. "Look alive, or you won't hev no fun. Ready, now, an' I'll drive the varmints back."

With a wild shriek the big gray stallion responded to his master's voice, and stretched out over the desert with the speed of a terrified antelope. It was a comparatively easy matter to head off the four fugitives, who, despite their frantic lashing, could not urge their mustangs beyond a heavy, lumbering gallop. In vain they veered to one side as the gray stallion forged ahead. Laughing shrilly, the wild rider headed them off from the desert, and then, as they slackened their pace, he thundered down upon them, his revolver speaking rapidly, the leaden missiles speeding to their mark with terrible accuracy. Two of the savages turned to flee, hoping to escape among the rocks. The wild rider followed them closely, but contented himself with driving them within range of the former fugitives.

"Sock it to 'em, young fellers, unless you want me to wind up the benefit," yelled the stranger.

Until now the men had stood in mute astonishment at the sudden change of affairs, but these words seemed to break the spell, and as the terrified red-skins swept by, their rifles spoke. With a half-stifled yell of agony, one of the dusky braves fell heavily to the ground, tearing and biting the hot sand in his death-throes, but the other shot failed to find its mark.

At the death-yell of his comrade, the sole surviving brave turned his head and glanced back. Close behind him and rapidly gaining was the man upon the gray stallion, his revolver at a level. His heart filled with despairing rage, the savage dropped the halter and plucked a feathered shaft from the quiver at his back. Since die he must, it would not be unavenged.

But his pony, no longer aided by the skillfully-handled halter, stumbled and plunged forward, casting the savage over its head. Active and lithe as a cat, the Kiowa saved himself from serious injury, and with a rapidity that told how thoroughly he was skilled in the use of the weapon, notched an arrow and drew it to the head.

The old hunter had abruptly checked his horse as the Kiowa's mustang fell, and was now sitting quietly in the saddle, not a dozen paces from the Indian. A little cry of joy broke from the Kiowa's lips, for he felt that vengeance was in his own hands. This man—whom he had recognized as one who had proved an inveterate scourge to his tribe—could not escape him now. Who could dodge an arrow at that distance? No one.

Yet the hunter did not attempt to retreat. But as the strong arm of the Kiowa drew the bow nearly double, the pale-face flung up one hand and fired with the celerity of thought. An involuntary yell of pain broke from the Indian, as the bow swung violently back against his breast, while the arrow quivered feather-deep in the glimmering sands halfway between the enemies. The blood was streaming from the left hand of the Kiowa, where the deftly-planted bullet had mangled the bones.

"Puckachee, you or'nary red nigger!" yelled the hunter, as the Kiowa darted toward the rocks, leaping swiftly from side to side as though fearing another shot. "Lucky fer you I'm

in a good humor to-day, or you'd sca'cely run fur. But I reckon you're marked bad enough fer onc't. Hellow thar, you chaps, good-mornin'! How d' y' do, anyhow?" he added, in a cordial tone, as he turned and rode toward the men who, beyond a doubt, owed him their lives.

"Thanks to you, we are alive and unhurt," warmly cried the eldest of the couple. "We meant to make a tough fight of it, but we must have been rubbed out, only for your bravery and generous—"

"Easy thar, stranger—jest slow up a little of you please. Thar's two things I can't an' won't stand: to hear a red-skin called a human critter an' to be thanked. I like you fellers so fur—you dropped them varmints out yander mighty slick—an' I don't want to quarrel w' you 'f I kin help it. But don't you do it ag'in—don't now."

"All right—I won't, for as I don't want to commit suicide just yet, I won't quarrel with you," half laughingly. "But, man, how you *did* walk into those rascals! It was glorious—they dropped like weeds before a prairie fire! I could only stare at you with open mouth. I never saw such shooting in my life. Did you *really* take aim, or just trust to luck?"

"Luck's good, but practice is a heap better," chuckled the hunter, as he dextrously reloaded his weapons. "I burnt many a pound o' good powder afore I could throw the blue pills jest as I wanted. I kin shoot now, a little."

"I've heard of such shooting—the boys were telling some fearful tales about a fellow they called Old Bull's-Eye, or the Lightning Shot. Is there such a person?"

"Yes, I b'lieve so. But *he* can't shoot—I kin beat him from now till the cows come home," chuckled the old man. "But I disremember what you said your handle was?"

"My name is Perry Abbot. This gentleman is Don Luis de Sylva, whose father owns a large cattle farm up on the Arroya Florez."

"I've hearn the name afore," slowly replied the old man. "Fact is, I was on my way thar when you fellers hove in sight. I reckon he's a old friend o' mine."

"I don't remember having ever seen you before," said Don Luis, gazing keenly into the weatherbeaten face.

"Reckon not—'twas afore your time that I knowed him, ef your father is the man I'm lookin' fer. How long 've you bin livin' in these parts?"

"Ever since I was born—and I'm eighteen, now."

"Eighteen—it may be that I'm on the wrong trail ag'in. But thar—I clean fergot. Which one o' these ponies 'd ye ruther have? Don't reckon you want to foot it home," abruptly added the hunter.

"Any one will serve to carry me to our rancho. I see you have a lasso."

"An' kin handle it, too," grunted the hunter, as he uncoiled the plaited rope. "I'll take the paint-mustang."

The Indian ponies had not offered to flee when relieved of their masters by death, so greatly were they jaded, but were now scattered around, occasionally nibbling at the dry fired grass that scantily covered the sands immediately around the edge of the rocks. One, a well-shaped spotted or "paint-mustang," caught the veteran's eye, and riding forward, he speedily flung the rawhide noose around its neck, leading the prize back to de Sylva.

"You handle the lasso almost as well as you do the revolver," said Abbot. "You know who we are; will you oblige us with *your* name?"

"That means who am I, don't it? Well, I'd like to tell ye, blamed ef I wouldn't, s'posin' I only knowed myself. Fact is, I was jest goin' to ask *you* who I mought be. Ye see this is the way 'twar. Thar war me an' Zeb—twin brothers. We went courtin' to the same house—Widder Spriggs—but he married the widder, while I married her da'ter Jerushy. Thar you see I was son-in-law to my own twin brother; but we manidged to stan' that. We each had three children. Then Jerushy an' Zeb went an' died. Fust thing I knowed a'ter that the widder married me. An' thar's whar the trouble commenced, an' jest whar I lost myself. I didn't know who in thunder I was, an' when we called in the neighbors to decide, they made out that I was 'ither my own great-gran'mother or else my own gran'child. I couldn't stan' that, so I jest pucked out hyar, whar thar warn't no danger o' my spankin' my gran'father fer makin' mud-pies an' sich," thoughtfully uttered the hunter.

"A sad history, truly," laughed Abbot. "The moral of it all, I suppose, is simply—you wish to remain incognito."

"I guess so. If incog-what's-his-name means what's my name out hyar in the desert, the fellers down Taos Valley way call me Old Bull's-Eye, or sometimes, fer a change, Lightning Shot, 'cause I'm rather quick on the trigger an' hev a trick o' knockin' the center."

"Is it possible? I've heard of the man, and of his wonderful skill with the pistol, but I thought it was half joking. And you are *really* Old Bull's-Eye?"

"You see these playthings?" quietly added the hunter, holding up a couple of broad Spanish dollars. "Take them, an' when I give the word, spin 'em both up in the air as high as ye kin. Ready? *Spin!*"

Abbot did as requested, and he who had called himself the Lightning Shot fired twice in rapid succession. To the young man's amazement, the flying bits of money vanished like magic. Then, chuckling grimly, the hunter pointed them out where they had been driven by the revolver-bullets. Incredible as it may seem, each piece had been fairly struck with a bullet.

"Them's my keerds, gentlemen. Thar's only one thi I'm proud of—only one thing that I kin brag of: an'

shootin' an' my name. Thar's many a man who's a better scholar, who kin foller a trail better, who kin drink more Taos lightnin', an' men who kin give me three p'int in a game o' seven-up; but I don't knock under to nobody when it comes to close shootin'. That's me—Old Bull's-Eye!"

"I doubt it no longer—give me your hand as a pledge that there's no wrong feeling between us."

"Putt her thar, pard; so—now we're hunky. But say; take your critters over to the black rock, yander, whar you'll find a spring big enough to water 'em. I'll be with ye soon's I take a look at this car'on. Mebbe they've got somethin' as a white man needn't be ashamed to make use of. We've airn't it, fa'rly."

Old Bull's-Eye was not long occupied, but found little to reward his search save a few silver pieces that found their way into his bullet-pouch. He did not mutilate his dead enemies; unlike most of his craft, he never "lifted ha'r."

"Now, friends," quoth Old Bull's-Eye, as he stretched himself at ease beside the spring and lighted his stump of a pipe, "ef I don't misjudge, the day's too far gone fer you to make the rancho 'ithout ridin' tell midnight. Then your critters is clean tuckered out. I move we bunk down hyar fer the night; what say?"

Both Abbot and Luis promptly agreed.

"All right. Now s'pose you tell us how you got into this little scrape wi' the Kiowas?"

This request was promptly complied with by Don Luis, but the substance of his explanation can be given in very few words.

Nearly a month previously Luis de Sylva had got into trouble in a gambling house while at Santa Fe, and was only extricated at no little risk by Perry Abbot. That incident led to an ardent friendship between the two, and Abbot was easily induced to accompany de Sylva to his father's rancho on the Arroyo Florez. Two days before our story opens, the young men started out for a hunt, which proved of longer duration than they had contemplated. While on their return home, they had well-nigh fallen into an ambush of Kiowas, and only escaped by the fleetness of their animals. But these had been sorely tried already, and only for the opportune appearance of Old Bull's-Eye they must have paid the penalty.

While Luis was talking, Perry was curiously eying the old hunter of whom he had heard so many and marvelous tales. It scarcely seemed possible that this could be the man. He was of the medium size, simply, even rudely dressed in buckskin and woolen. His hair was still thick and hung down to his shoulders in grizzled locks. His face was covered with a heavy beard of the same hue. His eyes were black and restless, keen and brilliant. His features were regular, his skin, what could be seen of it, was bronzed almost to the hue of his hated enemies, the Kiowas.

"St!" abruptly interrupted Old Bull's-Eye, his eyes beginning to glow, his nostrils to dilate. "Lis'en—don't ye hear somethin'? From the desert, yender?"

"I can hear nothing, but—" replied Abbot, as he leaped to his feet and glided to the end of the huge boulder behind which they had been lying, "I see something—a kind of dust-cloud out yonder."

"A drove of mustangs, maybe, coming here for water," suggested Luis de Sylva.

"A-follerin' your trail? Not much! Them's pesky Kiowas, a-comin' to look fer thar friends," snorted Old Bull's-Eye.

CHAPTER II.

THE RED HAWKS.

THE dust-cloud, rising slowly upon the freshening breeze, no longer obscured the advancing horsemen, now distant something less than two miles. They rode slowly, in an irregular clump, and if, as Old Bull's-Eye surmised, they were following the trail of the butchered Kiowas, they were in no particular hurry. Deeply imprinted upon the loose sand, the trail might have been lifted at a gallop. They were heading directly toward the little spring.

"I reckon we're in fer a scrimmage, boys," quietly said the veteran, hitching his belt around. "Your critters is too used up fer a race, an' the minnit we start out from ahind this rock, them varmints 'll sight us. They'd ride around us afore we could cross the range."

"But can we fight them? There must be over a score in all—enough to ride right over us."

"The odds is long—but you see'd how I handled them varmints out yonder. Kiowas ain't hefty on the fight."

"They are not all Indians—I can make out two or three white men," suddenly observed Luis de Sylva.

"You've got a keen eye, young man—I didn't notice that ontel you spoke. So much the wuss. Now we've got to fight. Decent white men don't consort with red varmints, an' ef—you've hearn tell of Red-headed Jack Hawk?" Old Bull's-Eye suddenly added, his voice changing.

The young men interchanged glances. They had heard of Red-headed Jack Hawk, or "Red Hawk," as he was generally known. Who had not heard of the audacious outlaw, murderer and road-agent? Of the man on whose head a dozen different rewards had been placed, whose trail had been marked in blood for nearly two years past, who was painted a monster of cruelty and ferocity, who was represented as a frightful ogre who daily quenched his thirst in the hot blood of his unhappy victims.

"Look! they're drawing rein," muttered Abbot.

"Yes, they've sighted the dead karkidges out yonder, an' don't know what to make of it—think it's a trap, mebbe. They'll be hyar soon enough, ef they're the gang I think. Ef the sun was nearer down—I" and the veteran cast a half-reproachful glance at the luminary now half-way between the meridian and western horizon. "Ef I was alone, I'd ax no better fun then to ride round an' round them slow pokes an' give 'em a taste o' fust-class shootin'. I could do it on old Ebenezer thar, jest as easy! But 'twon't do now; we're in the same boat, an' we'll stick it out together. While we're waitin' you fellers hed better look an' see ef your weepins is well primed. A hang-fire is a nasty thing in a muss, an' hes cost many a good feller his life."

While talking Old Bull's-Eye was closely watching the enemy. They had halted, clustering together and pointing toward the bodies of the two Kiowas slain by the fugitives before the old hunter put in an appearance. Then trotting up, they appeared to be examining the bodies and the trail. One of them spurred out from his comrades and galloped toward the other carcasses, though evidently keeping a wary eye upon the nearest rocks as though suspecting the presence of an ambushed foe.

As the man came nearer, a low grating curse hissed between Old Bull's-Eye's teeth, and a wild, vengeful look overspread his features, changing them for the time being into those of a very fiend. His long rifle was rested upon a point of the rock, and his glowing eye glanced along the bronzed tube. It seemed rank folly to attempt such a shot with a common muzzle-loading rifle, for the man, bending low in the saddle, was nearly four hundred yards distant from the little spring.

But Old Bull's-Eye knew what his weapon was capable of doing, and as the blue smoke puffed from the muzzle, he raised his head with a short, hard laugh. The scout raised upright, flinging aloft his hands, and then rolled from the saddle, tearing at his breast with convulsive fingers, while, with a snort of alarm, his horse wheeled and dashed rapidly back to the main body.

"Thar, old pard, I've kep' the oath I swore over your dead body nigh two years gone by. Down to the devil, your master, Poker Jess, an' tell him Old Bull's-Eye sent ye!"

"You've killed him," muttered young Sylva.

"Jest what I 'tended. Boys, I don't often take a man 'ithout givin' him a show fer his pile, but that cuss murdered my pard—the best an' only true friend I ever knowed—an' I swore I'd rub him out ef 'twas a thousan' years. When I see'd him thar, I couldn't help it. 'Twas a long pull, but old Ebenezer was ekil to it."

"We'll have to fight now," said Abbot. "See! they're charging in sober earnest!"

"They'll ease up afore they git hyar. 'Tain't in red-skin natur' to rush onto an unknown danger with his eyes shet; an' you see they've the biggest half. I reckon they're Kiowas, an' so we'd 'a' had to fight 'em anyhow. They'd never 'a' left the trail 'ithout it. Look thar! what'd I tell ye?" and the wild laugh of the reckless veteran rung out shrilly as the charging party slackened their pace, finally halting a few yards beyond where Poker Jess lay still in death.

"They mean to ask a parley, I guess," observed Perry, closely watching their movements. "Yes—see! he is tying a white rag to the end of a quirt-handle."

"Let the varmint come—I'll receive him."

"You don't mean—surely you'll not shoot him while he bears a flag of truce?"

"Not ef he don't try no tricks an' hain't Red Jack. Ef that skunk comes 'ithin range o' old Ebenezer, down he goes even ef he toted a thousan' flags o' truces. Thar he comes an' wuss luck! 'tain't Redhead. Now mind, you fellers is to lay low an' not show hide nor ha'r unless I say so. I'll do all the talkin' thar's needed."

A single horseman rode slowly forward, drawing rein beside the motionless body of Old Bull's-Eye's last victim, hailing the party hidden among the rocks in a clear, musical voice.

"Hellow yourself! what in blazes d'y' want, anyhow?" politely responded Old Bull's-Eye, as he stepped around one end of the rock and coolly squatted down upon a small boulder, with Ebenezer resting across his knees.

"A parley with you," was the prompt reply. "It is evident that there has been a sad mistake, through which one of my best men has lost his life—"

"Mistake nothin'!" rudely interrupted Old Bull's-Eye. "Ef he was a half-way decent white man, then thar was a mistake, but seein' he was a cowardly, treacherous thief, outlaw, gambler an' murderer, he got jest what he desarved an' jest what has bin kep' hot fer him these two years past. The devil had a mortgage on Poker Jess ever sence he was born, an' now he's claimed his own. Talk straight, stranger, ef ye kin."

"You are not over and above polite, friend, but let that pass. I desire a little talk with you, and as I don't care about splitting my lungs, if you promise not to serve me the same as you did Poker Jess, I will come a little closer. Will you respect a flag of truce?"

"Yes—a blamed sight more'n I do the one that kerries it jest now. But ride up. I give my word I won't tetch you, nor let any one else hurt ye, long as you act on the square, an' don't tempt to pass by the bit o' car'on nearest me," said Old Bull's-Eye, pointing out the body of the Kiowa slain by his first shot from the rocks, within one hundred yards of his present position.

The flag-bearer advanced to the indicated point, and then checking his horse, flung one leg around the high pommel, as though intending to enjoy the parley. He was a finely-formed man, young and remarkably handsome, though his face wore a singularly hardened, reckless expression. His dress was rich and of fine material, covered with gold lace and buttons, and silver tags; the holiday garb of a Mexican don, though his features were unmistakably American.

"First, allow me to introduce myself: Ralph Mayburn, first lieutenant of the Independent Rangers, at your service. And I am addressing—"

"The big snappin'-turtle o' Salt Lake; yes, sir; jist so," soberly responded Old Bull's-Eye.

"Your most obedient, Mr. Snapping-Turtle; I am proud to make your acquaintance," and Mayburn bowed low, with a mocking smile. "But to business. Do you know who killed these Kiowas?"

"My regiment rubbed 'em out," promptly replied the hunter.

"Your—ah, I see: you are fond of a joke. Well, you may be wise in improving what little time there is left you. But perhaps you will inform me *why* you killed them?"

"You was follerin' the trail. Unless you was blind you could see 'at the pesky varmints chased two of my scouts ontel they run smack into my army, and got rubbed out."

"One of your scouts was young Luis de Sylva?"

A half-stifled exclamation came to Old Bull's-Eye's ears from the covert of the young man, but as he gave a sharp hiss of warning, all was still again.

"S'posin' it war—what then?"

"Simply this: he is a dearly-beloved friend of ours, and we are anxious for him to pay us a visit that we may prove to him how dear he is to our hearts. In sober earnest, I verily believe that he is the only living person who can save you and your army from being massacred. My friends out yonder are very angry. They see so many of their comrades lying dead on these sands that they have fairly lost their reason, and swear that they must have eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Still, I have confidence in the eloquence of Don Luis—"

"Oh, cheese that humbug stuff," impatiently interrupted Old Bull's-Eye. "Spit out what you want in jest so many words, an' have done with it."

"Very well. You see my men out yonder. I know that you can have no more than two or three companions—"

"Easy thar, stranger. My rijiment is jest nine hunderd an' one men, four cannon an' a howitzer."

"Did I hear you say 'cheese it'?" laughed Mayburn. "But never mind. Stick to your story. You know well enough whether I can make my words good. In less than an hour from now you will all be dead men—yourself and regiment—unless you deliver over to us Don Luis de Sylva. Give him up and the rest may go free until this hour to-morrow. After that, look out for yourselves. The Red Hawks never suffer a comrade to die unavenged."

"I thought you was that flock o' buzzards. But see hyar. I don't treat with *boys*. Go back an' send your master hyar. I'll give my answer only to Red Hawk himself."

"Our chief is on more important business, over fifty miles from here. I command this band."

"Better luck fer *him*, then. I *did* hope to git a squint at the pizen reptyle over old Ebenezer hyar, which 'd be the eend o' his troublin' honest folks. Wal, sence I must give you my answer, hyar it is: I'll see you most essentially an' eternally roasted afore I give up young de Sylva or any other critter—an' then I won't!"

"The consequences be upon your own head, then, old man," sternly said Mayburn, as he turned and galloped away.

"The pesky, uncivilized rip! To ax me—a white man plum through—to ax *me* to do sich a dirty trick!" muttered Old Bull's-Eye, disgustedly. "Thar—I'm glad he's out o' range, fer I couldn't hold back old Ebenezer much longer. The bullet in its in'ards was a-kickin' like ge-mently, tryin' to git out after the reptyle o' its own a'cord."

"What can be their grudge against *you*, Luis?"

"That is more than I can tell. My surprise equaled yours when that fellow mentioned me in particular. I can't remember ever laying eyes on him before, and certainly I have never injured the Red Hawks, as they call themselves," thoughtfully replied de Sylva.

"They mean business now—look at 'em!" uttered Old Bull's-Eye. "They mean to surround us, I reckon. Well, let 'em try it. They've got long odds now, but I reckon we'll pull down the figures some afore the thing's eended."

Returning to his men, Mayburn appeared to be earnestly addressing them for some minutes. Then the band divided, half a dozen riding rapidly to the right, as many to the left, while the remainder dismounted and looked carefully to their weapons and the fastenings of their saddles and bridles.

"It's plain enough what they mean," quoth Old Bull's-Eye, coolly filling and lighting his pipe. "The Injuns they sent out ar' to kiyer in the rocks an' surround us. They'll snake up ontel they kin pepper us, then, while we're busy wi' them, the critters out yander 'll charge, thinkin' to ride right over us. You see they've kep' all the whites out thar, as bein' better fer a open dash. Thar's whar a Injun is lackin'. They're death on a trail an' good at sn'akin', but they cain't charge up to the muzzle of a rifle which they know is loaded an' holds a death in its chamber."

"It looks as though the odds were against us, this time."

"They be, that's a fact. Yit, ef we kin beat 'em off ontel

dark, I b'lieve we kin give 'em the slip, though we'll hev to leave our critters ahind, an' I hate that idee, peskily. You don't pick up a hoss like Snow-squall thar, every day," and the veteran cast a half-proud, half-regretful glance upon the gray stallion.

In a few moments more, only the outlaw force in front could be seen. The two parties of Indians had taken cover among the rocks. Then Old Bull's-Eye said, abruptly:

"Look to your weepens, boys; I'm goin' to open this muss on my own hook. Old Ebenezer's got the stomach-ache fear ful, nor he won't be easy ontel he's knocked over one o' them rapscallions out yender."

"You surely do not intend—" began Perry Abbot.

"Wait an' see," was the quiet reply, as Old Bull's-Eye, with his rifle resting upon his arm, stepped out from behind the huge boulder and coolly walked toward the outlaws.

As he stepped into view, there was an instant commotion among the enemy, and several leaped to saddle, but then, as they saw that the old man was alone, his actions were watched curiously. Coolly as though advancing toward friends, Old Bull's-Eye passed beyond the rocks and entered upon the desert. Ralph Mayburn spurred his mustang forward. It was a rash act, though beyond a doubt he believed Old Bull's-Eye was coming out to announce that the Red Hawks' terms were accepted.

"Sock it to 'im, old Ebenezer! 'F ye miss him now I'll never fergive ye!" muttered the old hunter, as, with a motion quick as thought, he flung forward the muzzle of his rifle and discharged it, apparently without aim.

Without a word or groan, Ralph Mayburn reeled in his saddle, then fell heavily to the ground. The small, discolored spot full between the eyes showed where the unerring bullet had entered his brain.

"Whoo-oop! hyar's y'ur cantankerous snolligoster o' Wilc. cat creek!" yelled Old Bull's-Eye, with a reckless laugh of fierce exultation. "Come an' see me—I'm little, but I'm tough! Who's the next critter to buck ag'inst the little infant which is called Old Bull's-Eye? Walk up, gentlemen, an' git y'ur tickets fer the country whar they war horns on thar heads, arrer-headed tails, an' hev only two toes on each foot! Come on, ye sorrowful sinners, ye wailin' tum'le-bugs o' perdition—roll up, ye caterwaulin' horn-toads o' desolation, an' git skrushd under the heel o' calamity to sinners an' evildoers—which is *me*, Old Bull's-Eye, the Lightning Shot o' the Plains!"

While delivering this characteristic defiance, the veteran held his ground, reloading Ebenezer with marvelous celerity. The fall of their leader appeared to have demoralized the Red Hawks, and though they sprung to saddle at the unexpected death-shot, not one seemed to know what course to follow. As when the hunter shoots the acknowledged leader of a flock of turkeys, the remainder run here and there, confused and bewildered, for some time, before another gobbler takes the fallen one's place, just so did the outlaws act when Ralph Mayburn fell dead before the unerring rifle of Old Bull's-Eye.

But the old hunter knew that this irresolution would be of short duration, and while recharging his rifle he kept glancing keenly along the line of rocks upon either side. And then he saw that the Kiowas were moving, dodging rapidly from rock to rock, hoping to cut off the bold pale-face before he could regain his covert.

"Keep y'ur eyes peeled, boys—the varmints is a-chargin'!" he yelled, in warning to his comrades.

As though his cry had set them in motion, the Red Hawks put spurs to their mustangs and dashed madly toward the daring plainsman, who coolly leveled his rifle, and again the unerring weapon sounded a note of death.

Thrusting his head through the strap, Old Bull's-Eye darted toward the rocks with the speed of an alarmed wolf, yelling madly. The Kiowas strained every muscle to intercept him, scrambling on the rocks and boulders, unheeding the numerous falls that would have disabled an ordinary being. But this ardor was perceptibly cooled as two rifles cracked and one brave in each party crimsoned the gray rocks with his life-blood.

"Sock it to 'em, boys! Whoo-oop!" yelled Old Bull's-Eye, pausing at the line of rocks and turning upon his pursuers, a revolver in each hand, while their bullets pattered all around him—a hail-storm of leaden pellets.

CHAPTER III.

THE ROCK FIGHT.

ON charged the Red Hawks, urging their fiery, half-tamed mustangs at breakneck speed, sending before them a constant storm of revolver-bullets and arrows. On scrambled the Kiowas, leaping and creeping, dodging and crawling, around, over and under the masses of rocks that were scattered along the ridge in such profusion, now and then uttering their wild war-cry or pausing to take a shot at the daring pale-face whose ringing laugh replied in taunting defiance.

Beside a gray boulder stood Old Bull's-Eye, facing the oncoming Red Hawks, never flinching from their mad rush, never wincing as the leaden hail pattered around him, though more than once his garments were pierced and his skin grazed, from which trickled the red drops. With as perfect coolness as he would have displayed were he merely exhibiting his skill at an inanimate target, the veteran discharged chamber after chamber of his revolvers so rapidly that the

succeeding reports were blended into one steady roll. It did not seem possible for him to secure an aim so quickly, yet he never sent two bullets upon the same mission. The foremost Red Hawks melted away like the seasoned prairie grass before the withering breath of a fall fire. His utmost skill was brought into play. He could not afford to waste a single bullet. Unless this mad charge was broken, all was lost. Neither Abbot nor de Sylva could come to his assistance. Their hands were full. The Kiowas, while rapidly advancing, availed themselves so adroitly of the good cover that it was next to impossible to secure anything like a certain shot at them. The coils of the serpent were closing steadily upon them, and death seemed inevitable.

Yet once again did the marvelous skill and cool intrepidity of Old Bull's-Eye change seeming defeat into victory. Though bold, desperate men, the Red Hawks could not continue this charge in the face of certain death, and with full half of their number fallen, the horsemen slackened their speed, then, with yells and curses of rage and terror, they turned and fled in hot haste, not pausing until beyond range of even old Ebenezer.

"Whoo-oop! set 'em up in the other alley!" yelled Old Bull's-Eye, laughing shrilly as his foes fled. "Now fer the red-skins. Sock it to 'em, boys! Now's your chance to make buzzards' meat o' the rambunctious flummydiddles! Look out thar—you, Abbot—plug the critter by that yaller rock. Good enough! You throwed the varmint, but you shot too high. He'll lay thar kickin' fer a good hour. Must 'arn to be marcfil even to an enemy like these. Rub 'em out clean, that's my motto," said the veteran, as he rejoined his young comrades behind the bowlder.

"We're not all Old Bull's-Eyes," laughed Abbot. "I did the best I knew how—'twas a snap-shot, anyhow."

"I reckon they think one Old Bull's-Eye's a plenty," chuckled the hunter, glancing toward the desert, where the four surviving Red Hawks were gathered together. "They lost five men in that charge; you fellers throwed two or three o' the copper-skins. That makes nearly half the outfit in the first scrimmage! Bully fer our side! Who said we couldn't whip 'em?"

"Yet it looked black for a few moments—I wouldn't have given a dollar for your life when they were charging down upon you," said Luis de Sylva, quietly.

"Better be born lucky then rich—an' I'm full as a tick o' luck. But easy now. Fust thing we know one o' them dratted Kiowas 'll slip up an' let daylight clean through some o' us."

"They've either retreated or else are lying close behind cover. I can't catch a glimpse of any one save those four whites out yonder. I guess you sickened them, old man."

There was little more conversation, and that in a desultory way, for Old Bull's-Eye evidently believed that the Kiowas were still holding their position, watching for a shot. He stationed de Sylva at one end of the bowlder, and Abbot at the other, while he crept further up the rocks, where, though his danger was increased, he could obtain a more extensive view.

At this moment one of the white men in the desert uttered a peculiar cry, and shortly after a Kiowa left the rocks at a safe distance from the trio, and joined the Red Hawks. After what seemed to be a close consultation, the savage mounted and rode away over the desert, soon disappearing in the distance.

Old Bull's-Eye, after a close scrutiny of the surrounding rocks, rejoined his friends, a slight frown upon his features.

"What did that mean?" asked Abbot, though feeling pretty well assured what the answer would be.

"Gone fer help, the blamed cowards!" growled Old Bull's-Eye. "They're still four to one, yit they're afeard to tackle us, an' so send off fer more coyotes. Old Red-head must hev a most mighty big gang, from the looks. Swarm around like a lot o' ho'nets out fer a hollerday."

"Must we wait here for them?" asked de Sylva.

"That's jest what I came down to talk about. Fact is, boys, we're in a trap. We kin whip these varmints easy enough, as long as we kin wait fer them to make the first move. From this kiver we kin pick off every mother's son of 'em, fast as they show up, by takin' keer not to waste bullets. With a bigger crowd it'd be different. By chargin' in sober earnest, in a crowd, twenty men could ride right over us, an' we a-doin' our level durnedest. They've sent fer more men, an' I reckon they're jest mad enough to try sech a charge when they come—that is, s'posin' we wait fer 'em."

"But can we slip away? If there is a chance—"

"Thar's always a chance long's a feller's bellers holds out, an' so thar is here," quietly replied Old Bull's-Eye. "We might try to slip away over the ridge. Some on us might reach t'other side, but it's 'most sartin that them pesky Kiowas 'd pick off one or two o' us afore then. They've got the kiver on us, an' I don't doubt some of 'em is workin' round to git in our rear. That's one chance."

"A tough one, truly," muttered Perry Abbot.

"Another is, s'posin' the ones they send fer don't git hyar ontel after dark. I know these rocks well enough, an' could lead you through 'em blindfolded. The chance is about even that we could git safe through without runnin' into any o' the skulkin' varmints. But the question is, how long 'll it be afore thar help comes? If afore dark, then our goose's cooked. It's sca'cely four o'clock now—good three hours afore dark. Shall we wait or not?"

"If it's a choice between the two plans, I vote wait. There's a chance that reinforcements will not get here before dark

while the other will be almost certain death to one or two of us."

"Jest my idee. But now hyar's what I think best to do. Your critters is pritty well rested now—anyhow, they'll stand a short brush. S'pose we mount an' make a dash right out at them four imps? They'll scatter, in course. We'll only hev to risk a shot or two from the Kiowas at fust, an' we'll be out o' range long afore they kin pick up thar critters. True, thar critters 'pear to be in better fix than your'n. S'posin' they do try to press us, I reckon they'll soon weaken on that. I kin ride clean around thar best mustang on Snow-squall, an' would bet long odds on clearin' out the hull outfit single-handed, fer they cain't shoot worth shucks, or they'd 'a' rubbed me out down thar. In this way we'll fool them as they've sent for, an' it 'll be good dark afore they kin ketch up, even s'posin' we're driven to kiver by these fellers, which I don't reckon we will be. Now what d'y' think of it?"

"If you think it's the best plan, and are ready to chance it, so am I," promptly replied Abbot.

"And I—any thing rather than stay cooped up here," added Luis.

"Good! an' now to work. You, young feller," addressing Perry, "look to your rifle an' crawl out yander a ways. Don't be in a hurry, an' keep well kivered. If you see a red-skin, plug him. I'll take this side. When I whistle, you, de Sylva, must lead the critters out to nigh the edge o' the sand. Crawl as much as you kin, an' ef any red-skin tries to pick ye off, I reckon we'll physic 'im. Think ye kin manidge it?"

"Yes—don't fear for me. When you want them, the animals will be there," coolly responded the young ranchero.

Fully comprehending the duty before them, each man prepared to execute it. Old Bull's-Eye and Abbot stole cautiously forward, keeping carefully covered, keenly scrutinizing every rock and bowlder that might afford cover to an enemy before advancing within range of it. Then, when he considered that a safe distance had been gained, Old Bull's-Eye sounded the signal for Luis de Sylva to perform his part.

This was accomplished with a degree of skill and coolness rarely found in one so young. Holding the halter Luis led the horses around the rock, and then sinking flat upon his belly, he skillfully crawled along, progressing with the silent celerity of a serpent, while the bowlders and fragments of rocks completely covered his person from the view of any of the Red Hawks whose suspicion might be aroused by the movements of the three braves.

That this progress was noted, both the veteran and Abbot had speedy evidence. Two Kiowas lifted their heads above cover, and were about to shoot down the animals, evidently suspecting some cunning ruse, yet ignorant that their movements were watched by vigilant enemies. And before they could secure an aim, a double report, nearly simultaneous, broke the air and was blended with horrible death-yells as the stricken savages bounded into the air, only to fall dead upon the rocks.

"Fodder up an' then snake for the hosses!" cried Old Bull's-Eye, as he rapidly reloaded his rifle.

The Red Hawks upon the plain seemed greatly excited, riding back and forth, yelling out warnings and directions to their red allies among the rocks. The Kiowas replied with savage yells, but did not break cover. They had been taught a wholesome awe of this wonderful marksman whom they had seemed unable to injure, who apparently bore a charmed life against their best-directed arrows and bullets.

Retrograding, crawfish fashion, the two marksmen succeeded in joining de Sylva, who had performed his task nobly, and then, simultaneously, they leaped into the saddle, and with loud cheers of defiance, dashed directly toward the four astounded Red Hawks.

A yell of surprise broke from the Kiowas who had taken to the rocks, and they sent a hasty volley after the pale-faces, who laughed with contempt as they heard the shrill whistling of the ragged bullets, wide of the mark. For a moment the four white outlaws seemed about to resist the onset, boldly, but as Old Bull's-Eye dashed ahead upon Snow-squall, yelling like mad, ramming a bullet home, their nerves weakened and they divided, frantically plying both steel and rawhide in the effort to get out of this man's way. That day had inspired them with a wholesome terror of his prowess.

"Bar a little to the no'th-west an' keep right on," cried Old Bull's-Eye, as he pressed a percussion-cap on the nipple of his rifle. "I'll soon ketch up. Must hev some fun fust."

"Look out—yonder comes the Kiowas!" cried Perry Abbot.

Old Bull's-Eye gave a contemptuous snort. Seated upon his noble Snow-squall, he cared little for the entire tribe of red-skins. With an encouraging word he allowed the gray stallion to forge ahead at full speed, rapidly overhauling the fleeing Red Hawks. A few seconds of this lightning speed, and he had gained the required distance. At a word Snow-squall halted and old Ebenezer rose to a level, just as the hindmost Red Hawk turned his head to glance back. He looked upon his own death-warrant. Possibly he may have distinguished the quick blue puff of smoke, but he never heard the sharp voice of old Ebenezer. The messenger of death was too speedy. He fell, a quivering heap upon the sands. His comrades heard the hollow death-groan, the sullen thud as the corpse fell, and plied their spurs with redoubled energy, every nerve tingling with the expectation of receiving the next shot.

But Old Bull's-Eye chased them no further. He saw that the Kiowas had mounted and were even now spurring furiously forward with the evident intention of cutting the single

man off from joining his friends. The plainsman laughed shortly as he noted this, and slinging his rifle to the saddle-bow, he drew a revolver and dashed along the back trail, heading direct for Abbot and Luis, not deigning to make a slight *detour*, as he might easily have done. Knowing that the savages' rifles were empty, he cared little for their arrows, and rode like a flash along their front, his revolver answering back the shrill twanging of bowstrings. One warrior fell badly wounded, another was seriously injured by the falling of his crippled horse, and then Old Bull's-Eye was up with his friends.

"You are wounded, man!" cried Perry, quickly, as he noted the feathered shaft of an arrow quivering beneath the veteran's arm.

"Only a scratch—jest through the skin," coolly replied the old hunter, proving his words true by pressing the arrow-head through the skin and cutting it off, after which the shaft was easily drawn out.

"They're following us—the white villains, too," muttered Luis.

"Changed inar tune mighty quick, the skunks. Reckon they—Ge-thunderan' blazes!" snarled Old Bull's-Eye, pointing almost directly ahead. "Looky yander!"

Outlined against the red sky, just appearing through a dust-cloud that had until now concealed them, the rangers distinguished quite a strong force of horsemen advancing rapidly. Even if they had any doubts as to the identity of this new arrival, the exultant yells of the Red Hawks would have decided them. Beyond a doubt it was the reinforcement the Kiowa had been sent after.

"Luck's on thar side this pop," said Old Bull's-Eye, disgustedly. "They'll see what we're after an' 'll cut us off. Foller me an' remember that the more o' the varmints ye knock over now, the less we'll have to deal with at the rocks."

With these words he wheeled and charged direct for the rocks, opening upon the savages as soon as within range. The Kiowas did not rush to a hand-to-hand struggle, though they kept rushing their tired ponies to and fro so as to oblige the pale-faces to strike the rock range at a point where it would be impossible for them to cross with their animals before reinforcements could come up. Several of their ponies were shot down, but so well did the Kiowas keep shielded that not one of their number was injured save by the falling of their animals. Luis de Sylva's horse was severely wounded by an arrow, but no other loss was sustained by our friends, and they succeeded in regaining the bowlder beside the little spring before the body of new arrivals came within rifle-shot.

These were nearly two score in number, mostly all of them Indians, and our friends were most agreeably surprised when they paused for a consultation instead of charging in a body. And then, as before, over half of the force were sent out with the evident intention of surrounding their anticipated victims, to guard against their escaping among the rocks. Old Bull's-Eye chuckled in high glee.

"The pesky greenhorns is playin' squar' into our hands. Thar only way was to ride custrut over us, but they don't like the idee—they know a wheen o' them must go under afore they could wipe us out, an' prefar to wait fer the dark to kiver 'em. All hunky! 'F they find us hyar, I'll agree to chaw soft-soap fer a livin'."

"Then you think we can steal through?"

"We've got to, an' that's the hull thing in a 'aig-shell. 'F we give 'em time, they'd creep up all around us, and then settle the thing with one jump. Or else they'd take kiver so close that they could pick us off with the first gleam o' day. We must steal through, an' that's why I say we will!"

The resolve of the Red Hawks to await the coming darkness could not long be doubted. Nothing was heard of those who had been sent among the rocks, while the others upon the desert dismounted and stretched themselves upon the sand, smoking their pipes or bark cigars in peace, though keeping a close watch upon the covert before them.

And thus for nearly three long hours our friends waited for the moment of action, almost wishing that the Red Hawks would precipitate matters by making an assault, so irksome was this long inactivity. But the enemy did not gratify them. Their very heavy loss showed them that, despite their great superiority in odds, numerically, it would be no child's-play, this rubbing out or capturing the three men behind the big bowlder. And feeling assured that escape by flight was impossible, the outlaws waited for the right moment with what patience they could summon.

The sun sunk from view, and the blood-red horizon deepened to purple, then a dull, leaden gray, and the figures of the Red Hawks upon the desert began to grow faint and indistinct, when Old Bull's-Eye knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and taking a long draught of the cool water, said:

"I reckon we'd better make a break, boys. It's gittin' dark enough, an' the sooner we git out o' hyar the better. Them varmints 'll begin closin' in now. Fix your rifles on your backs an' look to your pistols. Mind, you're to foller me close, to do jest as I do, in everythin'. Remember 'twon't do to talk ontel we're safe out o' these rocks, an' 'tain't light enough to read signs; keep close at my heels, stop as I do an' ef I drap down, you foller suit. Thar—now come on."

Old Bull's-Eye did not leave without an affectionate though silent leave-taking of Snow-squall. It was a hard task to abandon the faithful friend who had served him for years—a sort of companion even more loved and trusted than man; but life was still dearer, and he felt that it would only insure their discovery were he to attempt taking the gray stallion with him over the rocks through the darkness.

Their progress was necessarily very slow, as they crawled along almost flat upon their stomachs, while Old Bull's-Eye would pause at every few feet to peer ahead and around him, lest they should run into some of the skulking Kiowas unaware. This progress was terribly trying to the patience, but the young men had sense enough to know that it was their only chance of escaping the toils, where a single incautious step might—and probably would—cause their destruction.

During one of these pauses, Old Bull's-Eye turned and glanced back at his comrades. There was no need of words. From the desert behind them came the sound of a short, shrill whistle. And then, from directly in front, from their left hand and from their right hand, the fugitives distinguished low signals, the notes of birds, the chirping of insects, and the subdued voices of wild animals, and they knew that these were but signals passing between the Kiowas, either to assure themselves that all were upon the alert, or else as warning to move and close in upon the pale-faces.

Now came the perilous moment, but Old Bull's-Eye did not falter. Though expecting at every yard he advanced to see the dark figure of an enemy spring up with a yell of discovery, he crawled on in perfect silence, closely followed by the young men. All was silent now. The signaling had ceased, and there was nothing to guide them. Then, just as he was passing a huge bowlder, Old Bull's-Eye dropped flat to the ground, touching de Sylva, who came next, with his foot, as a signal to lay close. The next moment, the shadowy, indistinct shape of an Indian brushed noiselessly past them, so close that an extended hand could have grasped his ankles. Discovery seemed inevitable, yet the savage passed on in blissful unconsciousness of how narrowly he had escaped death. As the shadow vanished, Old Bull's-Eye drew a long breath, and sheathed his knife, but it was several moments before he ventured to proceed.

Yet he dared not wait long, lest the Kiowas should discover the flight by making a rush from the covert, and then, as each moment carried them still further from the cordon of red-skins, the fugitives progressed more rapidly, changing their crawling for a crouching posture.

The highest portion of the ridge was crossed in safety, without any sound from the rear, and already the friends were congratulating themselves upon their adroit escape. Less than a quarter of a mile further would carry them beyond the rocks, and then a few hours' steady travel would suffice to place them beyond reach of the Red Hawks. But just at this juncture a bright glare lighted up the darkness before them, a loud report was heard, and Old Bull's-Eye fell headlong to the ground!

CHAPTER IV.

THE RANCHO BELLE AND THE FATED GUEST.

"QUIET, Lolette—what is the matter with you to-day?"

With these words the rider leaned forward and soothingly stroked the glistening, proudly-arched neck of the snorting mustang—a beautiful cream and white spotted animal.

It was a charming picture thus formed; the spirited "paint mustang," every nerve aquiver, like a bird just ready to rise upon the wing, yet subject to the small, firm hand of the maiden who bestrode its back with the graceful ease and skill of one born to the saddle.

After a sharp gallop of several miles, the mustang had abruptly halted, snorting suspiciously, just as they were entering a small clump of trees and undergrowth through which the trail wound. And as the maiden cast her eyes around in search of what had alarmed Lolette, a half-suppressed exclamation parted her lips.

A dark figure suddenly sprang up from the dense undergrowth, and, leaping forward, securely grasped the bridle-reins. After a momentary struggle, Lolette yielded to the strong clutch upon her nostrils, and stood still, conquered.

"What do you mean, *ladrone!* Release my horse, or—I" cried the maiden, raising her riding-whip threateningly.

"Use white man's lingo, little one—I can't understand Greaser gibberish," roughly responded the man, instinctively throwing one arm before his face to guard against the expected stroke. "An' you keep that switch quiet. 'Twasn't made fer whippin' humans. I know 'tain't polite to handle a female critter rough, but don't do that—you mought git hurt. Better take things easy—it's the best way."

"Do you know who I am?" demanded the lady, in slightly-accented English, her whip-hand slowly sinking.

"Don't I? 'Tany rate, I've see'd ye often enough. Don't s'pose you remember me, though I reckon you've see'd me a thousan' times. I war one o' your pap's herders ontel he sent me adrift, fust givin' me a taste o' rawhide fer—as he said—'helpin' the reds run off some o' his cattle. I swore then I'd make him pay gold fer every lick, an' so I will. This is the very chainece I've been lookin' fer, this month past. I knowed you'd come this way sooner or later, an' I've bin layin' low fer ye. I've got ye now, safe an' sound."

"What is your object?" she quietly asked, shifting the whip in her hand until its golden head hung downward.

"Money—or revenge; I don't justly know which," slowly replied the ruffian, his bloodshot eyes roving gloatingly over the beautiful face and superbly-molded figure of his captive. "I thought I'd hold you pris'ner ontel the old man, de Sylva, kem down gineros wi' the dubb, but I don't know now."

"You're a likely-lookin' gal, an' I hain't hed a squaw—"

The coarse speech, rendered even more insulting by the leer that accompanied it, was abruptly cut short. Quick as thought the lady's arm rose and descended, the gold knob upon her whip striking the ruffian full in the face so forcibly that a jet of blood followed the stroke. Fairly on fire at the insult, the maiden plied the whip with wonderful force and rapidity, at the same time using her spurs freely, in hopes that Lolette would break loose and ride over the villain. Yet, despite the stinging blows, the hot blood that ran into his eyes, the outlaw held the mustang with a grip of iron, while attempting to shield his face with the other hand.

"Cuss you fer a wildcat!" he snarled, angrily. "I'll make you pay big fer this—jest wait ontel I git you—"

At this moment he succeeded in grasping the whip and wrenched it from the maiden's hands, tossing it, broken, into the bushes. Despite her courage, the girl felt her heart sicken as she found herself disarmed, and for the first time she raised her voice in a cry for help, forgetting that she was miles from home and friends. Yet a clear, mellow voice made answer, and turning her head, she distinguished the figure of a horseman, rapidly advancing. A furious curse from the ruffian told that he had noticed the rider, and for a moment he seemed about to plunge into the undergrowth in hasty flight. But then, as a second glance showed him that the horseman was alone, the old insolent look returned, and, with an oath, he drew a revolver from his belt and cocked it.

"Ef you keer much fer that spark yender, gal, you'd best tell him to keep to his own trail, fer ef he 'tempts to interfere with my a'fairs, down he goes ef he was the king himself," sullenly growled the squat Hercules.

"Help, senor—but be cautious—the villain is armed!" cried the lady, causing Lolette to rear and plunge, thus causing the first shot of the outlaw to speed far from its mark.

With a cry of encouragement, the cavalier dashed forward, holding a revolver in his hand but making no attempt to use it, evidently fearful of injuring the lady, while the cursing ruffian emptied chamber after chamber of his weapon without checking the stranger's charge. The blood that streamed over his face, or the restless movements of Lolette in obedience to the touches of her mistress' spurs, must have disturbed his aim, for apparently not one of the six bullets touched the horseman, who swiftly advanced, and, with his revolver almost touching the outlaw's head, discharged two shots in rapid succession. Without a groan the man dropped to the ground—a faint, convulsive quivering, then the roughly-clad figure lay still.

"You have killed him!" murmured the maiden, as she checked the affrighted plungings of Lolette.

"The dog deserved it for darsing to molest yon, lady," replied the cavalier, in a quiet tone. "He would not be satisfied with less. But he is not worth your regrets. May I ask what caused him to insult you?"

"He was a discharged vaquero, I believe, and declared that he would hold me for a heavy ransom. But, senor, are you injured?"

"No—thanks to your presence of mind. If the rascal had not kept hold of your bridle he might have shot better. But I am very well satisfied as it is," and the cavalier laughed pleasantly.

"I have not thanked you, senor, but it is because I cannot find words to express my gratitude. My father will know how—you will give him the opportunity? 'Tis but a few miles distant to our home."

"Thanks, lady, are embarrassing to one who has done nothing to deserve them. A kindly thought, now and then, is all I ask. But pardon my forgetfulness. My name is Crespino Montalado—I am bound for Santa Fe, on business. May I ask—?"

"You have earned the right, Don Montalado," smiled the lady. "My name is Anita de Sylva; my father has a cattle rancho beside the Arroyo Florez. He will be most happy to become acquainted with you. Shall we ride on, senor?"

"With pleasure. I did intend passing my night with the broad canopy of heaven for a coverlet, but—please do not think me too prosaic—a bed beneath a friendly roof is much more to my liking," laughed the cavalier.

"And that—" glancing toward the motionless body.

"Let it lie for the coyotes or vultures—fit grave for one who dared to insult you, lady. Or—we can send out a party from the rancho to bury it, if you prefer."

Side by side the couple rode away from the spot. An artistic eye would have dwelt upon them with pleasure. The fierce, spirited animals, gayly caparisoned; the easy, graceful attitudes of the riders, together with their rich, bright and picturesque dress—all was in perfect keeping.

Anita de Sylva was of that rare type of beauty in a Spaniard of pure blood—a blonde; but when met with they are almost invariably lovely beyond description. Her figure was tall and of such just and noble proportions that one was not so much struck by its unusual height as by the flexible grace, the undulating wavings and balancings of its motions. Her complexion was clear, yet not dazzlingly white; a healthful glow suffused her cheeks, perhaps deepened by the complimentary speeches so softly spoken by the handsome cavalier riding beside her. Her eyes, when at rest, were of a deep, soulful blue that changed with strong emotion to almost black. Her hair, a rich, golden yellow, she wore coiled round her crown in a massive plat, secured by a gleaming arrow. Her dress was of some light, yet stout material, and differed greatly from the habit one usually expects an equestrian

to wear, inasmuch as the skirt was very short, barely reaching the knee, open in front to the waist. Beneath this was a pair of Turkish trowsers, or "bloomers," full and flowing tight at the ankle, where they met tiny blue kid boots, that must have cost a fortune in that out-of-the-way place. These were each armed with a sharp golden spur, and rested in the silver-plated stirrups, for Senorita Anita rode *a la Mexicana*, or, in vulgar parlance, "man-fashion." Nor was it an unpleasing picture, though doubtless it would have attracted as much notice and comments in our fashionable circles as would the sight of a lady in a side-saddle in her portion of the globe.

Don Crespino Montalado seemed a fitting escort for the beauty of Arroyo Florez, though, had he not been mounted upon the big "States horse" it would have been seen that he was but little if any taller than the lady. Of slender, yet rounded and symmetrical build, he seemed almost effeminate, with his clear olive skin, the large, wondrously soft black eyes, the red lips, and white teeth, the profusion of blue-black hair that hung in slightly-curling locks over his shoulders, despite the black, closely-trimmed mustache that shaded his arched mouth. Yet his rescue of Anita proved that he did not lack a full share of manly courage.

Riding along the couple conversed pleasantly, this novel introduction having killed that reserve generally found between recent acquaintances. They soon came in view of the rancho, a long, low, massively-built structure, with flat roof adorned with a variety of plants and flowers. A stout stone wall surrounded the building and formed a spacious court before it. Beyond could be seen portions of the extensive corrals, and several smaller buildings, also protected with stout stockades, showed where the numerous herders and other retainers of the wealthy cattle-raiser were quartered.

Don Montalado was warmly received by de Sylva—a tall, stately, gray-haired Spanish gentleman—when Anita hastily made known the service he had rendered her.

A couple of servants were dispatched to the spot where the affray had taken place, with orders to bury the ruffian, but they returned in a couple of hours, with the tidings that nobody could be found. They found the marks of the scuffle, a pool of blood, and then marks that led them to believe the rascal had dragged himself along the trail into the undergrowth where he had left his horse, and had contrived to mount and ride off. They followed his trail until it was lost upon a tract of ground on which a drove of de Sylva's horses had been driven to pasture.

As twilight fell, the trio—Don de Sylva, Anita and Montalado—ascended to the azotea, each enjoying their cigarettes while conversing.

"You ask what my business may be at Santa Fe," at length uttered Montalado, speaking in a low, measured, but distinct tone. "I will tell you, freely, for it does not seem that we are other than old and tried friends. Yet it involves a not very pleasant story, though you may possibly have heard something similar to it before."

"Twenty years ago, more or less, a man, woman and child came into Santa Fe, and settled there. The man appeared to have command of plenty of money, and spent it with a lavish hand. For nearly a year he was very attentive to the lady, his wife; so much so indeed that he was quoted as a model of conjugal devotion and fidelity. But this soon changed. He began to frequent the gaming saloons, to drink heavily, to spend far more time and money with those who were notorious even in that city of loose morals, than he did with his family. And then, too, tales were told of his ill-treating her—of his cursing and even beating his wife. Well, after a long run of ill-fortune at the tables, he struck a golden vein and broke the heaviest bank in town—pocketing nearly one hundred thousand dollars, the reward of one sitting. And then he disappeared. At first 'twas said he was murdered—but finally it came out that he had run away with a certain woman. All trace was lost; the deserted wife could learn nothing further of him. Left without money, she nearly starved—she and her child. Then she, too, disappeared and was lost sight of for years."

"Now comes my part in the little drama. I was living in the city of Mexico. A woman came to me and claimed relationship, finally proving that she was my aunt, whom we had all believed dead, for years. She told us this story—of her trials and sufferings since, but which surely cannot interest you, senor. She made me swear to avenge her wrongs—to seek out and punish the man who had so deeply wronged her. I promised. She then bade me visit Santa Fe and seek out one Father Justin, a priest, in whose care she had left papers and proofs to substantiate her story. This, senor, is the object of my journey."

"Did she tell you the man's name?" asked de Sylva.

"Yes; Antone Barillo."

"And she said that he was her—her husband?"

"With her dying breath she swore it—and kissed the holy cross even as her lips chilled in death, senor."

"The child—what did she say of it?"

"That it was stolen away from her, within the year of her desertion; she believed by her husband."

"No—no, she was mistaken—that is, it does not seem probable that such a man would trouble himself about a child for whom he could have felt little love, else he would never have deserted them in the first place," hastily uttered de Sylva.

"Very true, senor. But did you never hear of this man?"

"Never—never until now. The name is strange to me. But 'tis growing late. Anita, you had better retire. Don Montalado, you will find your apartment ready for you, at

any time. I must beg your indulgence—this cool air is not good for my lungs—an old affection, which must be humored."

"No apologies, señor, I beg. I will smoke a cigar or two, and then follow your example, for I must continue my journey early in the morning."

After father and daughter had disappeared below, Montalado lighted a fresh cigar and stood leaning against the parapet, gazing steadily out upon the night. Yet it was evident that his reflections were anything but pleasant, for broken sentences unconsciously dropped from his lips, mingled with more than one imprecation, with which the Spanish vocabulary is so plentifully supplied.

"She was right—this is the man!" were words that a keen ear might have caught. "The darkness hid his face, but I could see that he trembled—and his voice, too. I must keep my oath—and yet—I could love that girl! Bah!" he abruptly added, shaking his head, impatiently, "Don Crespino Montalado, you are a fool!"

For full an hour he remained motionless; then, throwing away the stump of his cigar, he noiselessly descended the stone steps into the building. Though in the dark, he stole along like one who knew every foot of the way, no echo betraying his progress. Then he paused before a door and listened. All was still. Gently he tried and then opened it. A lamp, turned low, was burning dimly upon a table, beside the bed. In this bed slept Senor de Sylva, his gray hair and bronzed features contrasting strongly with the snowy pillow. A careworn expression rested upon his face, his brow was wrinkled and contracted.

The young man glided forward with the noiseless step of a panther creeping upon its prey, and bent over the slumberer. At this moment de Sylva stirred uneasily. Like a flash Montalado clapped a hand over the Spaniard's lips and nostrils. With a look of horror the old man's eyes opened, only to behold the bright blade of a cuchillo bending over his head.

Swiftly the steel descended—a dull thud—a faint struggle—then all was still—still as death!

CHAPTER V.

A WOMAN'S VENGEANCE.

"So—act first of our little drama," muttered the assassin, as he paused at the door to glance back upon his work.

Not a sound or motion came from the bed. The dim light faintly revealed the head and shoulders of the victim, rendering even more terrible the look of horror that had overspread de Sylva's countenance as he recognized his peril. And the large diamond that ornamented the knife-hilt flashed and sparkled like the eyes of some venomous serpent.

"The first trick is ours—now to arrange for the second. If he has not failed me—the clumsy brute had his directions plain enough, but 'tis hard to beat sense into a wooden head," added the assassin, as he carefully closed the door behind him and stealthily glided along the wide hall.

"Who comes?" demanded a low voice, from the front.

"'Tis I," was the soft reply. "I am glad to see that you can be trusted, Pepe. Be sure you will be generously remembered when our work is completed. And now—is all well without? The retainers have—"

"The way is clear, master," respectfully replied the old man.

"Nearly all the cattle are corraled, and those at large are so far distant on their ranges that you need fear no interruption from the *vaqueros*. And all the servants have retired to their quarters this two hours past."

"Very well—open, then, and keep a good look-out. Unless I return within an hour, you can close up," said Montalado.

The treacherous porter noiselessly unbarred and unchained the massive doors, and following the young man, performed the same service for him at the gate of the outer wall. Then Montalado glided silently away in the gloom that the myriads of twinkling stars failed to dissipate.

Crouching down beside a shrub, Montalado busied himself for a few moments with a small flask, then produced from beneath his cloak a little ball. Opening this, a spark of fire was revealed, which, carefully fanned by his breath, speedily burst into a flame. Then a brilliant, star-like point of flame was raised at full length of his arm. He had touched the glowing tinder to a "spit-ball" of moistened powder.

"Hal! there is the answer—then he *did* carry my message correctly," muttered Montalado, casting aside his signal-light as a similar one appeared amid the darkness ahead. "Now to see what her plans are."

Gliding forward, he soon reached the point where the answering light had been burned, beneath a small clump of the graceful algarobias. A figure, shrouded in a long, dark cloak, stepped forward and said, in a low, not unpleasant voice:

"You are late—I have been waiting here for full an hour."

"I had work to do, as you well know."

"And you—you have not failed?" eagerly.

"I do not often fail in what I attempt—nor have I in this. I have struck the first blow. Your suspicions were correct. This de Sylva, as he calls himself, is the man for whom you have searched so many years."

"You are sure—tell me all—everything!"

"Kansas Dave might have saved me that trouble, in part, but never mind. The night is before us. Listen then. You know that I have been lurking around here for nearly a week

—with Kansas Dave. Until to-day I was not given a chance. Day before yesterday Luis de Sylva and his friend, the American, left for a hunt, and so, to-day, the girl had to ride alone. I put Dave in ambush. He played his part to perfection. He came up just at the critical moment; Dave fired above my head; I played the same trick and left him for dead—ha! ha! Of course the lady was grateful—invited me home—and equally of course I accepted, seeing this was just the end I was working for. Well, I satisfied myself that we were upon the right trail—told the señor an affecting story that made him betray himself, and finally wound up by using my knife."

"You did not kill him—without letting him know—"

"I followed your instructions to the very letter," quietly interrupted Montalado. "I stole into his room and covered his nostrils and lips with a rag soaked in chloroform, but he opened his eyes and recognized me before I used the knife. After the story I told him, he must have known that I had been playing with him. But let that pass. What is done cannot be undone. The question now is, have you changed your mind since we last met? Am I to carry off the girl—"

"I have changed it in this—that we will strike one grand blow, instead of in detail. When you left, Red Hawk was gone, and with him nearly his whole band, and it was uncertain when he would return. Well, he has returned, and with more than double his old force. He met the Kiowa chief, Opishka Koaki, and their force is now one band. They contemplate a grand raid through Texas and across the border, but consented to aid me in my revenge, first. Part of them are now on the trail of Luis de Sylva and his friend; the others are awaiting my signal."

"Then you mean to—"

"To keep my oath of vengeance this night. We will carry the house, butcher his servants—kill, burn, destroy!" fiercely hissed the other; and the voice sounded more like the snarlings of a maddened wild beast than that of a human being.

"Hist! you must be more careful; there is no telling who may be prowling around, and if the alarm is once given and the house secured, not all the force of the Red Hawks could make an impression upon it. You must command your temper better—it is such fits of madness that have ruined your plans and hopes throughout life," a little sharply said the young man.

"Think of all my wrongs, think how terribly I have suffered, and all through him, the fiend incarnate! I tell you, Car—"

"Don Crespino Montalado, please, until this job is done," half-laughed the youth. "But there—I did not mean to laugh. I know well what sufferings you have undergone, and all through this man who now calls himself Senor de Sylva. I know, and I have promised to help you to revenge. I will still keep my word—but first; tell me what fate you have in store for his daughter, the lady Anita?"

"Why do you ask? What is she—what can she be to you?" almost fiercely demanded the other.

"Nothing—she can be nothing, as you say. And yet, I will tell you that I could love that girl. She is good, pure, noble-hearted—an angel of light beside you and I!"

"Will miracles never cease? You are growing tender-hearted—you, the tiger's cub, growing sentimental over a yellow-haired, doll-faced baby!"

"Baby or not, you will find in her an enemy not to be despised, if ever you meet face to face and unmasked."

"If—but she will not have the chance. This night clips her wings. I counted upon your aid, but I can do without it. Only, if you desert me now, my curse—"

"Stop—words are easy spoken, but hard to recall. What cause have I given you to talk thus? Your cause is mine, and I will not turn back now that my hand is to the handle. And yet, when I think of her, and think of what might have been if— But there. Enough of this folly. You did not answer my question. What do you intend doing with Anita de Sylva?"

"Red Hawk has seen her, and says—"

"He—the hideous, foul-mouthed brute! Mother, as God hears me, if that ruffian dares to so much as look at Anita de Sylva, with a thought to possess her, I will kill him, though by doing so I seal my own death-warrant. You—and I, as well—have sworn the death of this family, one and all, and if you hold me to my oath, I cannot prove false to it. But, though I have to use the knife myself, Anita shall not be wronged by Red Hawk, nor any of his followers. Surely one death is enough for your vengeance; you need not make her suffer death twice over."

"Well, let the matter drop. It is a subject for afterthought, and need not interfere with our work at present. You have arranged matters so that we need not storm the house. Though strong enough, if we can accomplish our object without loss to our side, so much the better. How is it?"

"The way is open. When you bade me come here, I had an eye to what might happen, and so sent Pepe ahead. He played his part well, and is now a servant inside. To-night he made the porter drunk, and is acting in his place. He will open the door at my signal."

"Good! you are my child, after all. But now, better go. You must be inside, to look after your new sweetheart—ha! ha!—or the dainty bird might come to harm, for the Red Hawks will flesh their bills deeply to-night."

"If they fly too high, mother, I know how to clip their wings. Remember, when you see a small fire-ball flung over the wall, you are to advance, on foot and in silence. Pepe will be ready to let you in. After that you know what

to do. I will go first and scout around the men's quarters, for if the alarm spread too soon, there are enough of them to give you serious trouble."

"Don't be long, child. I have waited for my revenge through near a score of long weary years, and now that it is within reach, I am on fire to grasp it."

"In half an hour, at the most, you shall see the signal."

Montalado turned and glided rapidly away toward the quarters where the herders, whose "off night" it was, were sleeping. The young man gave evidence of no mean skill as a scout and spy, as he noiselessly inspected the buildings, listening at the stockade, and then, satisfied that no one was upon the alert, he adroitly scaled the barrier, dropping inside. He had a double object in this. One was to ascertain beyond doubt that the herders were soundly slumbering, the other was to insure an easy entrance to the Red Hawks, so that they might crush the herders before they had time to fairly realize the danger that threatened. This Montalado accomplished by removing and concealing the massive bars that supported the folding gates. Then he glided toward the main building.

A low whistle assured Pepe, the false servant, that it was his real master who came, and the gate was opened.

"Leave it unlocked, good Pepe," said Montalado, in a low tone. "Our friends the Red Hawks will be here in a few minutes. Is all quiet within?"

"Si, senor," respectfully replied the man. "There is not a soul stirring, and only the snoring of drunken Rafael to be heard. The Hawks will find an easy prey this time, as well as a fat one. The old man can count his doubloons by the thousands, and the silver plate—"

"Hist—your tongue runs too freely, Pepe. Hast been at the strong water with old Rafael, I judge. But there—I leave you here until I come back. Get your fire-ball ready, and—"

A bright flash, a sharp report, and Montalado staggered back with a quick cry, stumbling and falling to the floor. And then a dark form leaped forward and buried a long knife to the very hilt in Pepe's throat.

"Hal old Rafael, drunk and snoring, may be, but not such a fool as ye think, ye dogs!" chuckled the porter.

CHAPTER VI.

BULLET, STEEL AND FIRE.

PEPE, with a gasping, gurgling cry, reeled back and fell over the stone doorstep. Old Rafael, whose seasoned head had not been so completely under the influence of liquor as the false servant had confidently believed, crouched forward to repeat the blow, though there was little need. The writhings of the stricken man were the convulsive throes of death, and he felt not the second blow.

Just as he felt the guard of his knife strike against the fallen man's breast, old Rafael sunk forward upon the body of his victim. A second pistol-shot filled the building with its echoes, and the bright flash revealed the blackened and grimed face of Montalado, who, recovering from the shock of the sudden shot that had scorched his skin and knocked the hat from his head, thus promptly avenged the death of his servant. And the two men lay there, their limbs still quivering, their hearts still palpitating, mingling their heart's blood together, both dead.

Montalado staggered over their bodies into the cool, fresh air of the courtyard. As yet, he did not know that he had escaped the sudden shot unharmed. His head was dizzy and he felt faint. Yet he was conscious of being in danger—that his carefully-laid plans were in great risk of being entirely frustrated. He could tell that the inmates of the rancho were alarmed—the cries and exclamations came confusedly to his ear. A few moments would bring the servants to the outer door, and when they saw the dead men, the doors would be promptly secured. This done, all the power of the Red Hawks and their savage allies could not force an entrance.

This thought enabled him to act promptly, and with a swift step he rushed to the gates in the wall and flung them wide open, uttering the shrill, wild war-cry of the birds of prey. The answer came speedily, and he could already distinguish the rapid beat of horses' hoofs, telling that the Red Hawks were losing no time. They had heard the pistol reports, and knowing that something must be wrong, charged at once, without waiting for the appearance of the fire-ball.

Montalado ran back to the doorway, and saw that several of the retainers were hurrying toward him, bearing lights, together with such weapons as lay close at hand when their first slumber was broken. Swift as was the swoop of the Hawks, they would have found themselves too late only for his prompt action.

With a revolver in each hand he stood in the doorway above the dead men, and opened a rapid fusillade upon the confused servants, accompanied by a fair imitation of the terrible war-whoop. This alone would have sufficed. The Mexicans have one huge bugbear—*los Indios*. Their unnerved hands dropped candles, lamps and weapons. With cries of horror, interspersed with hasty prayers to their patron saints, they fled in dismay, and sought safety by hiding in the darkest and most out-of-the-way holes and corners they could find, forgetting for the moment how little this could aid them.

The Red Hawks dashed up to the gateway, and dismounting, rushed forward, eager for bloodshed and plunder combined. At their head were two conspicuous figures. One was a giant in size and build, his long hair and beard, even in the starlight, showing red. The other was slender, almost to emaciation, dressed in a half-manly, half-womanly costume, with long gray hair floating in the air.

"Halt!" cried Montalado, in a startlingly clear tone, as he wheeled and confronted the Hawks. "Back there, Jack Hawk—back, I say, until—"

"Stand aside, you fool!" cried the giant, his heavy, rumbling voice sounding from deep down in his chest. "Out of the way there, and drop your tomfoolery."

"Back yourself, Bully Jack, or I'll see whether a half-ounce bullet can bore that thick skull of thine," undauntedly retorted Montalado. "There is no hurry here. The house is ours, for I've frightened the cowardly slaves thoroughly. But you'll get it red-hot from the quarters, unless you send your men there. They are different, those Americans; they'll fight like very devils, and unless you get in the first blow, they'll keep your hands full. A dozen can manage here—send the rest to look after them, or—"

A confused outcry from the quarters indicated showed that the young man's point was well taken, and then came half a dozen sharp reports. The rifles of the hardy herders were already at work, and more than one sharp cry told that all of the bullets had not been wasted. With an angry roar, sounding more like that of a wounded buffalo-bull than the cry of a human being, Jack Hawk turned to meet this danger.

Montalado waited for no more, but turned and entered the building, threading, with rapid steps, the long hall, guided by one of the still burning candles that he snatched up from the floor. Pepe had done his duty thoroughly, and Montalado knew the position of every room in the building, as well as their uses. In a few moments he paused before a closed door, which, on trying, he found locked, though he could tell that the inmates were asleep.

"Quick! open the door. Lady Anita, your father is sorely wounded, and calls for you. Haste—no delay—if you would see him before he dies, and receive his last blessing!"

An agonized cry—a rapid fumbling of the lock, and then the door was flung open. But Montalado caught the half-dressed form of the maiden as she was emerging, and forced her back into the room; then, with dextrous hand, he closed, locked and barred the chamber door.

"My father!" gasped Anita, shrinking away from him.

"You cannot go to him just now," said Montalado, coldly. "Listen!" he added, as pistol-shots, loud yells and cries of terror mingled in one horrible tumult, came to their ears with startling distinctness even through the closed door.

"They are murdering him—let me go to my father!"

"You would go to your death instead, lady. Step beyond this room, and your life would not be worth a moment's purchase. Listen—hearken to those cries, those yells! I tell you, girl, the very fiends of hell are let loose to-night, and woe unto those who come in their way!"

"And you—there is blood on your hands—you are—"

"Never mind what I am, lady; only remember this. I would be your friend, if you trust me. What I am—what part I have played in this night's work, you will learn soon enough. Only, if you would live to see to-morrow's dawn, you must be quiet and do as I bid. I came here to defend you with my life if need be, though I have been taught to hate and loathe all of the race whose blood runs in your veins. But hark! Ha! the Hawks are at the door—"

The hurried tramp of booted feet along the passage without ceased before the door, and then the frail barrier was assailed with pistol-butts and blows, while the blood-maddened outlaws demanded entrance.

Montalado stepped back and placed the candle upon a table, then, with ready-cocked pistols he glided toward the trembling maiden, who leaned, half-fainting, against the foot of her bed. With a low, inarticulate cry, a lithe form that until now had escaped the young man's notice as it crouched in a corner, sprang before Anita and threatened Montalado with a long, slender knife. It was Anita's maid, a comely half-breed, who was a deaf-mute. Her eyes, glowing like living coals, her firm-set teeth, the expression of her face could not be mistaken. She meant to defend her young mistress from one whom she evidently deemed an enemy.

"Peace, you fool!" angrily said Montalado. "I don't mean to injure your mistress, but defend her from those men who are now breaking down the door."

The maid glanced inquiringly at her mistress, who made a quieting gesture. The faithful creature lowered her knife, but still kept before Anita, keenly eying the young man.

The frail door began to splinter before the storm of blows and kicks, and knowing that it must speedily give way, Montalado cried aloud:

"Quiet there, you unmannerly brutes! There is no booty here other than that I claim for myself. Go fetch your foul beaks elsewhere."

"Open the door, or we'll down it!"

"I will—but mark this, Felix Reyardo—the man whose foot crosses this threshold without my permission, dies. You know me—what I promise I perform."

With these words Montalado removed the fastenings and flung open the door, then leveled his pistols. The group of rough, bearded men shrunk back from before the stripping, as though influenced by something more than the mere fear of receiving a bullet. The Spaniard smiled mockingly.

"You see, Felix Reyardo, you have made a slight mistake. What you seek is not here, and the sooner you take your departure, the better. You can find more manly work to do than this breaking into a lady's chamber. Go aid your master—from the sounds I hear he is having a hot time with those cursed herders. Go—fool, don't you hear?"

Looking like a cur cowed by its master's lash, the big Mexican turned and dashed away, followed by his men.

The uproar and tumult had, in a great measure, subsided within the rancho, for the terror-stricken servants had scarce made the faintest show of resistance, but were dragged from the holes they had sought refuge in by the ferocious Hawks, who showed no mercy. They had received their orders. They were to slay and spare not—they were to be killed, save those in whose veins flowed the blood of Juan de Sylva. But from without came an increased uproar. It was evident that the herders and stockmen were making a tough fight.

Unfortunately for the outlaw leader, Red Hawk, the sudden and unexpected alarm made him in a measure lose his head, and deranged his plans. Instead of at once rushing upon the stockmen's quarters, he lost time at the main building, and allowed his enemy time to recover from the surprise and secure their weapons. They also heard the war-whoop uttered by Montalado, and jumped to the conclusion that it was a foray of the ever-troublesome Indians, who hoped to stampede the stock in the corrals while keeping the pale-faces in dread of an assault upon the buildings, as had twice before been attempted. Believing this, the men seized their weapons and rushed forth, in the excitement never remarking the defenseless gateway, and opened fire upon the group before the courtyard gate.

Raging like a very demon as he saw his men falling before the rifle-bullets, Red Hawk led the charge, and then ensued a frightful *melee*, bloody and deadly in the extreme. Knives and pistols came into play as the foemen met hand-to-hand, and, though they strewed the ground thick with the bodies of their assailants, the stockmen were forced back by the mere weight of numbers. Foot by foot, step by step, the little band were driven back, though fighting for every inch of ground with an energy and resolution worthy a more happy fate. Then, with a quick leap back, they entered the yard and sought to close the gates against their foes. But the Hawks would not be denied. They crowded inside, maddened by the obstinate resistance of this handful of men.

One by one the stockmen fell, fighting to the last. Not one thought of asking quarter. The crippled struck viciously at the feet and legs of the outlaws who trampled upon them, and died in the act of dealing a blow. It was a wild, terrible scene, in which men died and wild beasts triumphed.

The victory was a dear one to the Red Hawks. Their dead comrades lay in a long row from the spot where the fight commenced to where it terminated with the fall of the last stockman. And both Mexican and Kiowa wreaked their hatred upon the senseless bodies, scalping, hacking, and mutilating them beyond all recognition.

Montalado, with ready pistols, kept guard over Anita, until from the sounds that came to his ear he knew that the massacre was ended and the plundering begun. Then turning to the pale, agonized maiden, he said:

"Come, lady, there is danger in remaining here any longer. The buildings will soon be fired, for Red Hawk has sworn to make clean work of this affair. Come with me, and you shall meet with no harm."

"To my father—you will take me to him?"

"Yes—you shall see him. Come," was the cold reply, and the mention of de Sylva seemed to harden the Spaniard.

Anita was forced to accept the support of his arm, and then they passed through the hall, closely followed by the faithful maid. Anita turned sick and faint, as she saw more than one gory, lifeless body lying upon the stone floor, and it was with a blessed sense of relief that she inhaled the fresh air as they passed from the building. Montalado hurried her outside of the courtyard where he heard his name called sharply. Turning, he saw the tall, gray-haired woman whom he had called mother, gliding toward them. She bent her head and peered keenly into the shrinking maiden's face.

"So! this is the dainty daughter of that villain—that cowardly traitor!" she cried, raising her hand threateningly.

"Back, mother—she is under my protection, now," sharply cried Montalado, interposing. "You shall not harm her—at least just yet."

"You her defender? Have you forgotten your oath—the solemn pledge you took, upon your bended knees, your lips pressed to the holy cross?"

"No, I have not forgotten. Would that I could. But the time is not yet. I shall guard her until we reach home."

"My father—where is he? Take me to him!" pleaded Anita. "You promised me that you would."

"If you passed your word, Don Crespino Montalado, you must not forfeit it," said the woman, laughing sarcastically. "Give the dainty lady her wish. Come, I will lead the way."

"But—" hesitated Montalado.

"Come! would you keep a loving child from her parent? You are hard-hearted, senor."

"I will go with you," said Anita, leaving Montalado's arm and grasping the woman's cloak. "You are a woman—you surely would not deceive me. You will take me to him?"

"Yes—I will take you to him," and with another clear, metallic laugh, the woman glided back to the house.

Montalado followed closely, a dark frown upon his handsome face. They found the door of de Sylva's chamber

guarded by several trusty men, who, at a quick gesture from the tall woman, stepped aside. She opened the door, and then beckoned Anita to follow. The maiden cast one swift glance around, and then, with a shrill cry of agony, she sprung to the bedside. The pale, distorted features of her dearly beloved parent—the motionless form, told her the dread truth.

"Dead—murdered! Mother of Jesus, look down in pity!"

The words burst from her lips like a wail, and she sunk down beside the bed, like one suddenly death-stricken.

"You have killed her!" hoarsely muttered Montalado, as he sprung forward and gently lifted the maiden's head.

"And if I have, what would it be but simple justice? But she is not dead—women's hearts are not so easily broken—haven't I learned that in all these years? She will recover—she *must* live—live to suffer, to know all the agony and wretchedness that have embittered my life ever since that traitor first crossed my path. But there—take her away—out of my sight, else I will give way and strike her dead upon his body. Go—or call one of the men yonder to help you."

Between them, Montalado and the Indian girl carried the insensible girl out of the building. Then, while striving to restore Anita to consciousness, he sent the servant, with a trusty man to guard her, to pack up a few articles of dress such as her mistress would require. This was accomplished, and then Anita was carried outside the courtyard, for the last act of the tragedy was at hand.

Red Hawk, having seen that the building was completely gutted, gave orders to the men to open the corrals and let out the stock. The animals, terrified by the uproar and confusion, were nearly wild, and as soon as the barriers were thrown down, away they dashed in a stampede. But the business was in charge of old, experienced hands, and the mighty herd was soon headed in the direction of the Hawks' Nest, when they were suffered to run without opposition. The further they raced, the easier would be the outlaws' task.

While this was in progress, Anita partially recovered, though she seemed dazed and stupefied by the heavy blow. Montalado watched her closely, though he was glad she was so quiet. He had nerved himself to meet a stormy scene.

He had taken care that Lolette, Anita's mustang, was secured, and now aided her to mount. He was about to ride away when his mother came up and bade him wait.

Red Hawk had given orders to burn the rancho, quarters and other outbuildings, and already the red glare of the devouring flames was visible. The captives, all of them women, the Mexican and Indian servants of the house, were collected together, gazing upon the scene in stolid despair. Almost all had lost some near and dear one, and as the flames arose, a wild cry broke from their parched lips. They knew that this was the funeral pyre of their dear dead.

Anita roused herself at this fearful burst of agony, and stared around, bewildered. The tall woman laughed shrilly.

"Look, Anita de Sylva—look at the red blaze—see how it springs up! And your father lies in there—dead!"

With a low, wailing cry, Anita sunk forward.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAN-HUNTERS.

THE rifle-shot and the fall of Old Bull's-Eye came so unexpectedly that Perry Abbot and Luis de Sylva stood in their tracks as if transfixed. They had congratulated themselves on having fairly eluded the Red Hawks, and believed that all danger of discovery was past. This sudden attack completely bewildered them.

"Injuns—look out, boys, the red-skins is hyar!" yelled a stentorian voice almost ere the flash of the piece had died away.

"Injuns nothin'!" promptly rejoined a voice, remarkably unlike that of a dead man; as, to the unbounded astonishment of Perry and Luis, Old Bull's-Eye arose. "Is that you, Murph. Toole?"

"Who 'n thunder 're you who knows my name?" came the answer from out the gloom, in the voice that had shouted the alarm. "Speak quick or I'll plug ye!"

"You came pesky nigh gittin' plugged yourself, Murph. I hed the drap on ye, when you squealed an' I recognized that sweet tongue o' yours."

"Old Bull's-Eye, as I'm a sinner!" cried the man, in a tone of glad surprise. "Was it you I shot at?"

"Twas, fer a fact. But say—jest give the whistle that all's right, or we'll have a wagon-load o' lead feelin' around our fleeces, an' all the boys mightn't be such poor shots as you," quickly added Old Bull's-Eye.

His quick ear had caught the faint sounds of footfall among the rocks, and he knew that Toole's comrades were on the alert. The sentinel, whose hasty shot had only been avoided by almost lightning quickness on Old Bull's-Eye's part, passed the word that all was well, and in a few moments more the three fugitives found themselves surrounded by nearly six-score stout men, armed to their teeth.

"Who's boss hyar?" asked the old hunter, without replying to any of the many questions poured upon him.

"I am," promptly replied a tall, athletic man.

"You want to make a few feathers fly out o' Red-headed Jack Hawk's lot o' buzzards? Talk quick!"

"I'd ride fifty miles on the blackest night ever was for the chance. And there's not a man here but would be glad to keep me company," was the prompt reply.

"Good! Count off three or four men to stay hyar an' mind the critters; the rest o' you foller me."

There were few among the band but had heard of Old Bull's-Eye, and all were glad of a chance to follow his lead, never stopping to ask his plans, the force of the enemy, or, indeed, any questions. As he passed rapidly along the back trail, they trod close upon his heels, yet with as perfect silence as though they had been red-skins stealing upon a sleeping enemy.

Yet a disappointment awaited them. Not one of the band of Red Hawks could they flush, and an hour later, as the party gathered around the little spring, even Old Bull's-Eye was forced to give up the hunt as useless. Probably the outlaws had heard the rifle-shot, and in some manner discovered the strong body of allies met by the fugitives, when they fled, well knowing what the result would be in case they met in conflict. The sturdy Texans owed them many a heavy grudge, and would be only too glad to wipe out the scores with a leaden pift or knife-thrust.

"Durn the luck!" muttered the veteran, angrily. "I counted on gittin' another whack at them ornary thieves to-night, but the onmannerly brutes must up an' pucker jest to spile fun. An' then they've tuck old Snow-squall—"

As if this was a signal, a shrill whicker sounded and the clank of iron-shod hoofs sounded upon the rocks toward the edge of the desert. With a glad cry Old Bull's-Eye leaped forward and the next moment was hugging and kissing the noble gray stallion that had, in some manner, escaped from or eluded the attention of the Red Hawks. Old Bull's-Eye no longer bewailed the flight of the outlaws.

"Disappointed in their hopes of a 'scrimmage' with the marauders, the majority of the band returned to their camp, but Murph. Toole and two or three others, who were old acquaintances of Old Bull's-Eye, remained with our friends at the spring. And over their pipes they mutually explained.

The leader of the band was one Walter Dugrand, a native of Louisiana. Years ago—just how many, the Texan could not say—Dugrand had a fine plantation in that State, and was happy in the possession of a beautiful wife and daughter. He also had an enemy, one who knew how to bide his time, while watching for a favorable moment in which to strike a deadly blow. That time came at length; and here again, Toole seemed rather misty as to the real facts, probably because Dugrand did not care to dwell upon his misfortunes to outsiders.

"Anyhow, when he came back from Orleans, both his wife an' gal was gone, no one 'peared to know how or whar. But he finally struck a trail, which he b'lieved was the right one—a man, woman an' young girl, who'd crossed the Sabine. But he lost the trail at Nacogdoches, nor did he hear anythin' more ontel last year. Then he heard of a woman an' gal as was consortin' with Jack Hawk's band, an' from the 'scription, he thinks they're his women, more 'specially as this Red-head is the very moral o' a man who, years ago, swore vengeance ag'inst him fer something. So he sets to work an' gits us chaps together, payin' us wages to help him hunt down the Red Hawks, an' promises us two hundred dollars each when we git the women back, besides."

This, in brief, was the story told by Murphy Toole, and fully explained the eagerness of Captain Dugrand to meet the outlaws, as well as his wild rage at finding they had fled. As Toole concluded, Old Bull's-Eye remarked:

"I've heerd o' this gal with Red-Head, an' from all a'counts she must be a screamer on wheels. Wouldn't mind ridin' a day or two myself, on the chaine o' seein' her."

"Why can't you? You know the kentry like a book, an' air wuth any two men in our outfit. The boss'd give big pay to make sure o' your help," eagerly added Toole.

"I wouldn't be fer the pay, ef he'd offer me a gold mine. Critters like me don't need much money, an' when I do need it, I know whar I kin put my fingers on dornicks o' pure gold big as hens' eggs. The fact is, I'm in these parts on a little business, o' my own, an' can't leave it. I'll know what I want in a day or two, mebbe, an' then I'm game fer a ride lled Hawk in."

There was little more conversation, and their pipes emptied, the men lay down to spend the remaining hours of night in slumber. At early dawn they were astir, and eat a hasty bite of jerked meat, washed down with cold spring water. Though nothing could be seen of the outlaws who had been slain on the preceding day, their bodies having evidently been removed by their comrades, several horses were seen grazing along the edge of the rocks, and mounting Snow-squall, Old Bull's-Eye soon had two of them lassoed, ready for the use of his young friends.

While thus engaged, Toole and his comrades returned, accompanied by the rest of the Man-Hunters, who were leading their animals across the rocky tract. It was Captain Dugrand's intention to take up the trail of the Red Hawks, hoping that he would follow it to their headquarters. He made Old Bull's-Eye a generous offer if he would join him, but the veteran returned the same reply he had given Toole. He had important business of his own that must be attended to first; and then they parted company, Old Bull's-Eye, Perry and Luis striking over the sandy waste toward the Arroyo Florez. The young men were unusually gay and light-hearted, probably because they had emerged so successfully from the toughest scrape either had ever fallen into. Little did they dream of what was before them.

"Holy mother of mercy! look yonder!"

It was late in the afternoon of that same day. With only an hour's halt for nooning to rest their animals, the three

friends had ridden steadily, all of them being anxious to reach the rancho, Old Bull's-Eye fully as much so as the others, though he did not give it open utterance.

Luis de Sylva it was from whose suddenly blanched lips broke the sharp exclamation. And good cause for it.

They had galloped their animals up the long slope, from the summit of which they could obtain their first view of the Rancho de Sylva. But then they impulsively drew rein. Truly, it was a sad, desolate sight that met their eager gaze.

An irregular pile of ruins, from the midst of which still ascended tiny curls of blue smoke, telling only too plainly what agency had lain that proud pile low. The corrals had not been spared. Such portions of them as would burn were now naught but ashes. They were empty, save for a few carcasses of cattle over which the black vultures or zopilotes already hovered, while others perched upon the walls or stalked slowly around, stuffed to repletion.

All this—and more—the three men took in at a single glance, and then plunging spurs rowel deep into their animals' sides, Luis and Abbot dashed recklessly forward, caring little, thinking little of the danger that might be lurking in wait for them. Old Bull's-Eye followed more leisurely, his eagle eye taking in everything as he advanced, roving in all directions, assuring himself that there was no ambuscade laid for them at the ruins.

Pale, trembling, sick at heart, Luis de Sylva fell, rather than leaped, from his saddle before the gates of the house where he had spent so many years of pleasure—a house no longer—a blackened, scarred and smoking ruin. His last hope was banished. This had been no accidental fire. The wantonly-shattered furniture that was scattered about the courtyard, the marks of pistol and musket balls, the little dark blotches that showed where some poor wretch had drained out his heart's blood—all this spoke only too plainly. This was the work of a human enemy—though human only in shape.

With a desperate effort, Luis de Sylva threw off the incubus that fettered his mind and limbs, and followed by Perry Abbot, clambered over that portion of the wall which had fallen before the doorway, and entered the building. And then a scene of indescribable horror broke upon them.

The fire ignited by the Red Hawks had but imperfectly done its work. Owing to the scarcity of wood in that region, the rancho was built almost entirely of stone and adobes. The walls still stood, save just beside the great doorway. The light partition walls, the furniture and hangings, had made a fierce though brief fire. But it was not the stained floors and blackened walls that caused the young men to shrink back in horror.

Before them lay over a score bodies that had once been living, sentient human beings. But now—their clothes burned off, their flesh charred and crisped, they were beyond all recognition. And the young men believed that their dear ones were lying there in that sickening pile.

"This is a devil's job, poor lads!" said a sympathizing voice.

It was that of Old Bull's-Eye, who had secured their horses in one of the corrals, and then entered the building.

"Come—rouse up!" he continued, in a low, stern voice. "This is no time for idle repining—rouse up and be men, for there is men's work before you. Some one must pay for this—these poor creatures call on you for vengeance!"

There was a marked change in the old man's manner of speech, but it passed unquestioned then.

"You're right, old man—we will have vengeance. Wake up, Luis—dear brother—think of revenge!"

Luis de Sylva did not speak, but grasped Abbot's hand and pressed it fiercely. His face was still ghastly—more like that of a corpse than that of living being—but his eyes glowed and glistened with a fire so intense that Old Bull's-Eye feared the terrible shock had unsettled his brain.

In silence the trio advanced and bent over each one of the disfigured bodies. Long and carefully they scanned the size and general contour—but none among the number corresponded with those for whom they were searching, yet feared to find. Yet they dared not hope that they had escaped.

Then they passed along the hall, and Luis entered his father's chamber. By some chance this had escaped the fire-brands. The furniture was overturned and broken. Bed-clothes, stained with blood, were strewn around the room. A flashing point of light caught Old Bull's-Eye's attention, as his comrades were leaving the room, and he saw that a small, highly-polished dagger, with a large diamond set in the hilt, was driven firmly into a table-top. With a quick cry he clutched it. A bit of paper fluttered to the floor. With trembling fingers he seized this, and a strange gray pallor overspread his weather-beaten countenance as he read the words penciled upon the scrap:

"Antone Barillo, remember Dolores Vermillye. The avenger is at your heels—death to you and yours."

Ten minutes later Luis de Sylva turned suddenly as a hand touched his shoulder, and, despite his anxiety and grief, could not help noticing the great change in his old friend. Old Bull's-Eye thrust the dagger-pierced scrap of paper into the young man's hand, and in a low, strained tone, asked:

"Do you know who this was intended for? Did you ever hear either of these names before?"

"No—they are strange to me. Where did you find it?"

"Think again—be careful, for more depends upon your answer than you imagine. Tell me—did you ever hear your father mention either name?"

"Never. I don't understand you."

Old Bull's-Eye stooped and peered keenly, almost fiercely, into the young man's eyes, but he read nothing there to confirm his suspicions.

"Pardon me," at length said the old man, with a long-drawn breath. "I see that you are speaking the truth. I hoped that you could give me the clue. I've traveled thousands of miles to find this man—this Antone Barillo. But never mind. Have you found out anythin' new?" he added, abruptly, resuming his old manner and style of speech.

"Nothing—we can't. And their—bodies. Can it be that they were taken away as captives?" said Perry Abbot, his face brightening.

"It may be—anyway we'll b'lieve so ontel we find out different. Come—le's git out o' this graveyard—the smell makes me sick. Mebbe we kin find some sign outside as will tell us who cut up this devil's didoes," said Old Bull's-Eye, leading the way into the open air.

But scarcely had he reached the courtyard gate when he abruptly pruned, with a low exclamation. There was no need for explanation. Directly before them, though still several miles away, they distinguished a number of horsemen riding along in a dust-cloud cast up by their animals' hoofs. This party was undoubtedly approaching the ruins of the rancho. But were they friends or enemies? That was the question.

Old Bull's-Eye prostrated himself and crawled rapidly along to the corral in which he had left their horses. His example was promptly followed, and then the trio closely observed the party. Their number could now be distinguished, nineteen in all.

"Look to your critters an' weepens, boys!" suddenly cried Old Bull's-Eye. "It's 'ither fight or run, an' I chooses the fust. Them's our old friends, the Red Hawks!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEEDS OF THREE DESPERATE MEN.

THERE could be little question as to the truth of Old Bull's-Eye's statement. The band of horsemen was composed of nearly equal parts of Indians and pale-faces. This fact, coupled with what had already transpired, made the exclamation seem a very probable one, and as the party came near, all doubt was at an end. They were indeed Red Hawks.

A few words may not be amiss here. This body of horsemen were a portion of those alluded to by the tall, gray-haired woman, when she told Montalado that a number of the Red Hawks were on Luis de Sylva's trail. They were the survivors of the rock fight, who had so earnestly sought to gain possession of the young rancho. It seems that one of their number—an Indian who had been sent among the rocks—discovered the camp of a strong band of white men at the other end of the range. He had reconnoitered them, and was hastening to give the alarm to his friends when he was passed by the fugitives. Then came the rifle-shot and alarm, and knowing what would probably be the next move, the Red Hawks took wing, though still hovering around in hopes of picking up their prey. The Man-Hunters struck their trail, and for several hours the Red Hawks were fully occupied in breaking this among the hills. Then they struck out for the Rancho de Sylva, hoping yet to accomplish their purpose.

"Look—they're halting," muttered Abbot. "Wonder if they can have seen us as we crept in here?"

"Tain't likely; they want to make sure that we ain't here ahead of 'em. Ef they don't see no signs, they'll think they've got in ahead of us, an' will give us a good chaine to git in the fust lick. See! what 'd I tell ye? They're comin' on ag'in."

"Let them come—all will not go back with sound skins," said Luis de Sylva, in a cold, hard tone.

"Look hyar, boys, you mustn't lose your heads an' act the fool, jist 'cause you're b'illin' over. Cool an' steady 's the word. Fust rifles, then 'volvers. You two keep together as nigh as ye kin, an' when ye strike, strike to kill. When the fun begins, one or t'other on us must go under, an' I reckon it 'd be most comfable to rub *them* varmint's out. Jest make b'lieve 'twas them as did this bit o' work hyar, an' then cut loose."

"I believe they did—or that their friends did," quietly said Abbot. "Unless anticipating some such sight as this wouldn't they betray more surprise and excitement?"

"I didn't think o' that—ten to one you're right, young feller—an' I'm goin' to find out, too. But there—don't talk no more. Ready to fire when I do, an' then drap rifles, mount an' charge right into 'em."

There was no time for further speech. The Red Hawks were advancing in a canter, and heading direct for the ruined rancho. The three men took a position where they could secure a good aim when the outlaws passed before the broken bars of the corral, and with ready rifles, awaited the proper moment to strike. Their horses stood near, so that no time would be lost in mounting.

Little suspecting their peril, the outlaw band continued on until abreast the corral entrance. Then came the sharp crack of Old Bull's-Eye's rifle, closely followed by two other reports, and three saddles were emptied. Almost before the survivors could comprehend what had happened, a wild, shrill yell arose, and three horsemen dashed out of the corral and charged them with wonderful audacity, considering the heavy odds. And

then, as the revolvers began their deadly music, the Red Hawks recognized the big gray stallion, and upon its back the old man whose marvelous skill with rifle and pistol had so terribly thinned their ranks on the preceding day.

"Sock it to 'em—don't let ary one o' the dirty buzzards fly to kerry the news to their nests!" yelled Old Bull's-Eye, as he hurled Snow-squall fairly into the midst of the confused outlaws, his revolver speaking rapidly, each note sounding the death-knell of the renegades, while his strong hand guided the kickings and plungings of the big stallion, who bit and fought like a wild beast.

Perry Abbot and Luis de Sylva fought in silence yet with a dash and quiet ferocity that they had been strangers to until this day. Like an inspiration came the belief that this ruin and desolation was the work of the Red Hawks, and that thought spurred them on to deeds that seemed marvelous. Side by side they charged, their pistols playing rapidly, unheeding the bullets and arrows that began to whistle and hurtle past them, never even attempting to dodge the blows that were leveled at their lives as they plunged into the midst of the surprised enemy. Yet they broke through the mass unharmed. They seemed to bear charmed lives. No bullet nor arrow harmed them, though more than once their garments were pierced, and their mustangs were bleeding from a score of wounds.

Through the mass, scattering the Red Hawks like a flock of geese. Then wheeling, they charged again, raging like madmen, fighting with a desperation and nerve that was fairly marvelous. Stout men went down before them like babes. Nothing seemed able to withstand them. And so they fought on, silent and speechless, their stern-set faces filled with deadly determination, their eyes glowing like molten iron at a white heat.

Half a dozen of the Kiowas united in a desperate charge against Old Bull's-Eye, who laughed shrilly as he read their intention, and wheeling Snow-squall, he changed his pistol for the other, as yet unused. He did not wait their charge, but dashed forward like a flash. The savages discharged a flight of arrows. Old Bull's-Eye suddenly dropped to one side of his animal, and a wild yell of triumph broke from the Kiowas, who believed their worst enemy disposed of.

But this error was short-lived. The hunter arose erect, untouched. His sudden move had allowed the feathered shafts to pass harmlessly through the air where his body had been only one instant before. And thus he was upon the amazed red-skins, laughing like one who took an intense pleasure in the wild, reckless *melee*.

One—two—three; so rapidly following each other that the reports could not be distinguished from one prolonged echo. And as many Kiowas were hurled to the ground by their snorting, terrified mustangs. They struggled faintly—their limbs were convulsed; but neither of the trio attempted to arise and renew the struggle, nor to avert the trampling hoofs that struck viciously around them. They were dead.

And as Snow-squall tore past the survivors, Old Bull's-Eye turned in the saddle and emptied his pistol before being carried beyond range. The struggle with that party was ended. Five dead bodies cumbered the torn and blood-stained sand; the sixth was carried swiftly away, lying upon his mustang's neck, his life-blood rapidly pouring out from the hole in his breast, sprinkling the dry sands with a crimson rain. And all this in less than thirty seconds. Right well was the old man's sobriquet bestowed—he was indeed a Lightning Shot!

For the first time since the confused fight began, Old Bull's-Eye had time to glance around after the fortunes of his young friends, and a sharp cry of apprehension parted his lips as he urged Snow-squall forward. Truly his strong arm was sorely needed.

The Red Hawks had in a moment recovered from the surprise of the unexpected and deadly attack, and pressed around the two friends, who quickly found themselves in a tight place. For a time they kept a small space clear, fighting desperately, but this hot work was rapidly emptying their pistols, and their mustangs, unused to their riders and scarce half-broken, were growing unmanageable, rendering their aim uncertain. And the outlaws closed around them, yelling and firing. An arrow took effect in the throat of Abbot's mustang, and it fell as though stricken by lightning. It was at this moment that Old Bull's-Eye dashed forward to the rescue.

A brawny Kiowa was bending over his mustang's neck in the act of impaling Abbot upon his lance. Old Bull's-Eye just had time to shift his hold on the long navy revolver, and passing by he dealt the savage a furious blow upon his crown with the heavy brass-bound butt, shattering the skull like an eggshell, bespattering those around with clotted blood and brains. Dropping the pistol the moment he struck the blow, Bull's-Eye drew the long bowie from his belt and leaped Snow-squall over the struggling form of his fallen friend. Luis de Sylva nobly seconded his efforts. The stripling, usually so quiet and even retiring, was changed into a very demon by the terrible loss he had sustained, and fought with a vigor, exposed his life with an utter recklessness that equaled that exhibited by Old Bull's-Eye.

A pressure of the knees guided Snow-squall, and as he passed between two of the Hawks, Old Bull's-Eye buried the long knife to the hilt in one man's breast, while his left hand closed around the other's throat, tearing him resistlessly from the saddle, though the mighty effort caused the mad rider to drop his weapon. But he was equal to the emergency. With a power that seemed marvelous in one of his build he lifted up the captive until his feet were clear of the ground. And then

as the outlaw's head pressed against the hard pommel, Old Bull's-Eye raised his clenched fist and dealt the struggling wretch a fearful blow full upon the temples. There was no need of repetition. The Red Hawk's temples were fairly crushed in.

This was the last feather. Not five minutes had elapsed since the first shot was fired, yet only four of the outlaws remained alive. And these, with cries of terror and dismay, plunged spurs into their horses' sides and sought safety in flight. Superstitious as all ignorant, brutal men are, they believed that Old Bull's-Eye was something more than mortal. No mere man could display such terrible prowess.

Old Bull's-Eye singled out one of the two Mexicans—the other two were Kiowas—and urged Snow-squall in pursuit. Being but indifferently mounted, the fugitive was rapidly overhauled, despite his frantic spurring and lashing. And laughing again, the avenger lifted the big stallion from the ground and hurled him forward. The iron-shod hoofs struck down both horse and rider, the latter rolling swiftly over and over, striving to avoid the peril. But in vain. A single touch of the rein sufficed. Snow-squall planted his fore feet fairly upon the Mexican's breast. A sickening, crushing sound, and then, laughing like a very demon of destruction, Old Bull's-Eye thundered over the desert in pursuit of his third victim.

The Red Hawk was superbly mounted, and made the most of his animal's speed while his dreaded enemy was busy with the other fugitive, but Old Bull's-Eye had yet to meet the horse that could hold its own with his pet, and Snow-squall, divining what was expected of him, and running under free rein, stretched out over the desert at full speed. Steadily the big gray lessened the intervening space, and as if satisfied, Old Bull's-Eye completely gathered up the coils of his lasso, shaking each loop clear of kinks.

The fugitive glanced back and saw the preparations of his foe. None knew better than he how deadly the lasso is in experienced hands, and, though despairingly, he made what preparations he could to avert the danger. Clutching the reins tightly, he drew a knife, holding it firmly in his right hand, hanging close to his side.

The dark, snake-like coils shot through the air with unerring aim, the wide noose settling over the rider from the head of his horse to its tail; yet the cast was foiled. Quick as thought the Hawk flung up his bridle-hand to the crown of his head, holding the reins taut as a bow-string, at the same time making a quick, slashing stroke with his knife. The noose slipped along the taut reins and dropped harmlessly from the mustang's haunches.

With an angry curse Old Bull's-Eye rapidly drew in and recoiled the lasso, which had escaped the outlaw's knife. Again he made the cast, and though the Mexican again flung the noose past his head, it closed around his right arm as he made an attempt to cut the rope, and with a jerk that almost tore his arm from the body, he was plucked from the saddle and hurled to the ground with stunning force.

Old Bull's-Eye leaped from the saddle and bent over the man, a look of anxiety upon his face.

"Good!" he muttered, in a relieved tone. "He's only stunned a bit, and will soon be able to tell us what we want to know."

This was his object in taking the outlaw alive. The suspicion so suddenly conceived by Abbot that the Red Hawks had wrought the ruin of the de Sylva rancho had deeply impressed him, and he believed that he could frighten his captive into letting out the truth.

Luckily the man's fall had not broken his neck, and he was already giving signs of recovery. Old Bull's-Eye cut strips from the outlaw's garments and securely bound his hands behind his back. Then, with the lasso noosed around his neck, the discomfited Hawk was forced to arise and follow his captor, who mounted Snow-squall and returned to his young friends at a pace that severely tasked the Mexican's fleetness of foot. But it was either keep up or be choked, and he preferred the former.

Perry Abbot was sitting upon the body of his horse, coolly inspecting his wounds and bandaging them as well as he was able, under the circumstances. His hurts, fortunately, were but little more than scratches, with a few painful bruises, the consequence of his awkward fall with his horse. Luis de Sylva, soon after returned from his fruitless pursuit of the terror-stricken Kiowas, who had fairly distanced him. He also bore traces of the desperate fight, though in no wise disabled. Old Bull's-Eye alone escaped without a scratch. Well might the trio congratulate themselves on this victory.

Satisfied that his young friends were not much the worse for wear, Old Bull's-Eye turned his attention to the captive Hawk, who, on being questioned, told a brief but glib story.

He and his comrades were peaceful citizens, whose journey had been interrupted by the sight of the ruined rancho, and they were simply riding up to examine it and see if they could learn how it had come about, when they were assailed.

"Bah! you are lying like a *padre*," sharply interrupted Old Bull's-Eye, in Spanish, which he spoke like a native. "We know who and what you and your precious comrades are—thieves, robbers and murderers. We had an introduction to you yesterday, over yonder at the rocks, where we three whipped one-half a hundred of you cowardly Red Hawks. You see I know you. Now listen. The people who lived in this rancho were friends of ours. This place was burned last night. The Red Hawks did it—your comrades. All this has got to be paid for, and we will begin with you, unless you buy your life by telling us just where the nest of the Red Hawks is."

"I am not a Red Hawk, but if I did belong to them, I'd never betray them," slowly but firmly replied the captive.

"Give him a bullet and end the matter," sternly cried de Sylva.

"I'm runnin' this machine, young feller," sharply retorted the veteran; then turning to the captive, he resumed. "The man who kicks against fate is a fool, senor, and you look too sensible to sacrifice your life to a mere whim—for those who would not do as much for you. A man has but one life; he can make a dozen vows. The fact is you *must* tell. I dislike to press a gentleman, but—you understand?"

"The trail is there. If, as you say, the deed was committed by the Red Hawks, why not follow this trail? 'Twill lead you to their nest, if that is what you desire."

"Or into an ambush by the way—thanks. But there—enough of this nonsense. You can take your choice. Either tell us what we wish to know, quietly, or else have it wrung from your lips by torture. Which is it?"

"Can a man tell what he does not know? True, I might send you upon a wild-goose chase, but I do not choose to lie."

Indeed! I feel sorry for you. But there—Abbot, you straddle Snow-squall and ride inside the yard, yonder. Then throw over the noose. When I say *git*, just walk the critter forward a few steps; we'll try what a little choking'll do."

Abbot obeyed in silence, though he did not greatly fancy the idea of turning hangman. Old Bull's-Eye forced the Mexican up to the wall and adjusted the slip-noose around his throat. Pale but firm, the captive denied all knowledge of the Red Hawks' retreat, and angrily the old man gave the signal. Kicking and writhing convulsively, the wretch was drawn half-way up the wall, where he hung by the neck, suffering all the horrors of a slow strangulation. Old Bull's-Eye watched him critically, and when he saw that death must soon ensue unless the noose was loosened, he called to Abbot to slacken the lasso.

It was some seconds before the Mexican could speak, but then, in answer to Old Bull's-Eye's repeated query, he said, in a low, determined tone that could not be mistaken:

"I do know what you ask. I am a Red Hawk, and I glory in the title. Listen. When I joined them, I took a solemn oath to never divulge any of their secrets. I swore it upon the holy cross. You may torture me—kill me by inches, for you have the power. But nothing can make me break my vow."

Old Bull's-Eye laughed shortly, and then bade Luis de Sylva pick out the youngest and fattest of the mustangs running loose, and kill it. For lack of better, its meat would suffice, and when once on the trail, they could not venture to hunt or cook. Then leaving Abbot to guard the determined prisoner, he strode away to the ruins of the stockmen's quarters. These had been composed of heavier timbers than usual, and, buried in the ashes, some of the beams still smoldered freely. With a pole he shoved aside the debris and laid bare a bed of living coals. Then he motioned Abbot to lead up his captive.

"You say you will not confess. I say you shall, or die such a death as you never even dreamed of. Tell me what I ask, or by the God above! that bed of coals shall be your last resting-place upon earth."

"I will not break my oath," said the man, but his voice was less firm than before, and he trembled like a leaf.

Before Abbot, who believed the old man was only seeking to frighten the captive, could interfere, Old Bull's-Eye hurled the Mexican into the fire!

CHAPTER IX.

THE END OF A CROOKED TRAIL.

A HORRIBLE, ear-splitting shriek of the most intense agony burst from the Red Hawk's lips as he fell at full length upon the bed of glowing coals. Kicking, writhing he strove to escape, but the strong lasso still noosed around his neck kept him from rolling off the torturing bed.

Perry Abbot turned away, sick with horror. This was more than he had bargained for. It was the act of a devil rather than man.

But Old Bull's-Eye was not ready to sacrifice his captive just yet. He had an object to gain, and until that was successful, he meant to keep the Mexican alive. So, with a strong pull upon the lasso he dragged the miserable wretch from the glowing coals, and rolling him over and over in the sand, speedily extinguished his smoldering garments, aided by Perry. So deftly and rapidly was this accomplished that the outlaw was not seriously injured, though painfully scorched and blistered. He was evidently suffering acutely, far more so than if his hurts had been more serious, and this was precisely what Old Bull's-Eye had calculated upon.

"Mercy—for the love of God, mercy!" gasped the wretch, between his moans of pain.

"Shut up!" said Old Bull's-Eye, sharply turning upon Abbot, who began to assure the man that he should be tortured no more. "You'll undo all I've done, if you ain't keeful." Then he added: "You see now what you get by being obstinate. If it was so hard to bear for five seconds, what would it be to lie there and slowly waste to death?"

"Mercy—have mercy! do not throw me in there again!"

"That depends upon yourself, altogether. I asked you a question, which you refused to answer. Will you answer it now?"

"Will you promise to let me go free, if I do?"—eagerly.
 "It is not in your place to make conditions. Refuse to answer, and back you go into the fire. It's your last chance."
 "And if I do tell, what security have I that you—"
 "The word of a man. If you tell the truth, you shall be tortured no more. If not—well, you can easily imagine the rest."

The prisoner sullenly yielded to the inevitable, and gave his tormentor a brief but clear description of the place where the Red Hawks had their stronghold. Old Bull's-Eye questioned him closely, and from his tolerably thorough knowledge of the surrounding country felt pretty sure that it was truthful. To make sure, he added:

"If you have attempted to deceive me, it will be the worst job of your life. I'll put you to tortures ten-thousandfold more intense than those you have already tasted."

"I have told you the truth. Now what are you going to do with me?" anxiously demanded the outlaw.

"Put you where I can lay my hand on you whenever I wish. Lend a hand, Perry."

The Mexican was carried into the chamber that had been Senor de Sylva's, where he was placed upon the bed, bound hand and foot. A quantity of roasted meat and a large earthen dish of water was so placed that he could reach them with his mouth. Then Old Bull's-Eye said:

"You will remain here until we return, but as that may not be very soon, you had better be sparing of your meat and drink. Starvation is an unpleasant death."

"But you may get killed!" falteringly exclaimed the captive.

"That is a chance we must all run. It may be as well for you to pray to your patron saint to guide us safely on our journey, for your life depends upon ours."

With these cold words, they left the captive, who called after them in an agony of apprehension. Echo alone answered him. Truly, his bed was not one of roses.

The sun was just setting, and the young men were chafing impatiently at the deliberate movements of the veteran, who sat munching his horse-meat in silence. But at length he condescended to answer them.

"Now, ef you fellers hev blowed off all your extry steam, mebbe you'll listen to reason. Listen. Ef that varmint told the truth, the pint we must strike for, is some seventy miles from hyar. Neither man nor critter kin keep travelin' all the time, an' we've all on us hed tough work sence yesterday mornin'. S'posin' we start on the trail now, an' foller it 'pon foot as you want to do, what'd we be fit fer at t'other eend? Not much. We must start sensible, ef we expect to do any good. Our critters must be rested an' fed. We must hev an hour or two of sleep. That's the hull thing in a nutshell."

"You can talk coldly—you have no interest in the matter—they are not your kindred who may be, at this very moment, suffering horrible torments," hotly said Luis.

"Young feller, I hev a interest in this matter that you cain't guess. I'm an old man, but I'd give half my remaining life to see your father free, and before me."

"You speak in riddles—why is it you are so anxious to meet my father?"

"One thing is to find out who this note is written to," quietly replied Old Bull's-Eye, tapping his breast where the dagger-pierced note was securely stowed away. "But thar—you ketch up a critter for Perry, and we'll cross the crick whar thar's better grass. The sooner we do it, the sooner we'll git started on the trail."

Though reluctantly, the young men were forced to yield to the veteran's will, and as the shades of night fairly settled over the earth, they were soundly slumbering upon the grassy swell, beside their greedily-grazing horses. The long, hard day's ride, followed by their tremendous exertions during the hand-to-hand fight had completely exhausted them.

Old Bull's-Eye did not lie down, but sat at a little distance from his friends, apparently keeping guard. But his thoughts were far away—his eyes riveted upon the bit of paper and the diamond-hilted dagger, though the words could not be deciphered in the uncertain light of the moon. Nor did he stir until the velvet muzzles of Snow-squall was gently pressed against his cheek. Then, with a start, he arose and glanced hurriedly around. From the position of the moon, he knew that he had sat thus for over two hours, and carefully replacing the paper, he aroused Abbot and Luis de Sylva.

Recrossing the arroyo, they took up the trail and rode rapidly on through the night. There was no danger of their straying from the trail. The Red Hawks had swept the corals clean, and drove before them nearly fifteen thousand head of cattle and horses. An army could not have left a broader or deeper trail, and the three friends rode along at a steady gallop.

The general direction agreed with the statement of the Mexican, and so Old Bull's-Eye kept to the trail for the greater part of the night, but then, to save time, he left the broad spoor upon his left, thus, as he believed, saving several hours of precious time.

Just as the day was dawning, the trailers halted at a little grove of trees that bordered a tiny stream running a few rods, fed by a spring, ending in a miniature lake. For hours they had ridden over a barren, dreary waste of sand, where their animals labored heavily, sinking fetlock deep at every step, and all were jaded, hungry and thirsty.

But Old Bull's-Eye motioned them back as he stooped low over a small pile of ashes beside the spring. Though the light was dim and uncertain, it was sufficient for his keen eyes.

"Fire built yest'day—three pussons ett grub—that's whar they set; two close together, on them leaves, t'other one off thar, by hisself. One big, old man; wore moccasins; crippled o' his left foot—two smallest toes cut off. One light-built man—small foot in high-heeled boots—spurs on. One woman, teenty foot, with moccasins—no, she'd tuck off her shoes, I reckon, fer a bit, sence hyar's the prent with heels."

Muttering this like one reading from a book, Old Bull's-Eye closely inspected the deserted camp. The young men interchanged glances. The same idea struck them both. And yet the idea was a wild one. How could she have come here, yesterday? and with only two companions?

"Yender's the trail they left by," said the scout, pointing nearly due north. "Wonder who they were? Only that we've got other business, I'd study it out, fer the one that made these littlest tracks was a white gal, sure."

Luis de Sylva dismounted and glided over to the spot indicated by the old man, and bent over the trail. Three horses had passed by. With a sharp cry he ran along for a few yards, then paused again, sinking upon his knees. And in the gray light of dawn he read the truth.

"That's the track of her pet mustang, Lolette," he uttered, as Perry Abbot hastened to his side.

"And I've just found this," replied Abbot, producing a small gold locket, set with jewels, hanging to a small piece of a chain.

Without a word Luis touched a spring and the locket opened. It contained two portraits; those of his father and mother. They doubted no longer, forgetting how easy it might have been for another to have dropped the locket, since the rancho had been plundered.

As they hurriedly discussed their breakfast of cold meat, washed down with cold water, the young men congratulated themselves upon the fortunate chance that discovered to them this deserted camp and trail, but Old Bull's-Eye sat in stolid silence, nor did he arise, half an hour later, when they prepared their animals for work.

"Come, friend," said Abbot, "the horses are rested enough."

"I ain't going on that trail," was the deliberate reply. "It don't lead in the right direction. The Hawks' Nest lies that a-way."

"But it is certain that she—my sister, went this way. We started to rescue her, and by hard riding may overtake them before night. There's only two men with her."

"But your father hain't one on 'em, an' he's the man I'm lookin' after. Ef he's alive—ef them imps didn't, burn him in the rancho—he'll be at the Red Hawks' Nest. Thar's whar I'm goin', fust of all. Ef you foller that trail, you've got to do it alone."

The old man was obstinate in his resolve, and nothing they could say would alter his mind. Then angrily, Luis de Sylva turned his mustang and dashed away upon the trail, followed, after a moment's hesitation, by Abbot. And with their last glance back they saw him squatted beneath the tree, quietly smoking his pipe, while Snow-squall cropped the grass around him.

Little did any one of the trio dream of all that was to happen to them before they were united again, else the parting might have been more friendly.

For mile after mile the young scouts followed the triple trail with little or no difficulty, for the loose sand received a deep impression, and the wind had not been strong enough to greatly mar it. But then, a little before noon, there came a change. The level desert gradually gave way to more broken country, rocky, and difficult of travel. The trail led directly into this, and for the first time since parting with Old Bull's-Eye, the scouts really had to exercise their skill at trailing. It was rarely, now, that they rode faster than a slow trot, generally walking their animals, and more than once Luis was forced to dismount and pick out the trail step by step. Instead of the ground growing more favorable, it was the exact reverse, until at length they found themselves in the heart of a tract almost precisely similar to that from cover of which Old Bull's-Eye first put in an appearance.

They grew impatient at the slow progress they were making, and like many another young trail-hunter, they quickly "lost their heads." In other words they rushed ahead, hoping to light upon the trail again at a more favorable point. The natural consequence followed. They lost the trail entirely, nor could they regain it, though they quartered the ground upon their hands and knees for fully an hour.

"It's no use!" muttered Luis de Sylva, brushing the perspiration from his heated brow. "The trail is lost for good. Our only chance is to keep on in the general direction it has taken, and look for it when the ground is more favorable."

Abbot could suggest no better plan, and so they toiled on through the ragged masses of rocks and boulders, now turning aside to avoid a bramble patch, again diverted from a direct course by some deep canon or impassable gulch, along the brink of which they were forced to ride often for miles before they could effect a crossing. It was nearly dark when they reached the further side of this modern slough of despond, and then, though worn and jaded, hungry and athirst, they lost no time in searching for the broken trail. But fate seemed against them. The wished-for tracks did not reward their eager, anxious peerings, and it was with hearts sick with hope deferred that they saw the gloom of night settling rapidly, casting a veil before their eyes.

Yet they did not draw rein, but wandered on long after sober reason told them that the trail was hopelessly lost, for that night at least. But finally Luis said, with a weary sigh:

"There's no use in looking any longer. We must wait."

until daylight. If Old Bull's-Eye had—Bah! where's the use of talking? Come, we must look for a place to camp."

"Out yonder—a couple of miles distant—is a grove of trees. I noticed them before dark. Of course there's water there, since there's trees. Shall we ride over?" said Abbot.

Luis made no reply, but dejectedly followed his comrade's lead. After all their bright hopes, this utter failure was indeed a heavy blow. The ride was in silence. Their tired horses' hoofs gave out no echo as they fell upon the loose sand. It had been a severe day's work for them, and not even the scent of water could urge them out of a walk.

They had nearly reached the stunted timber, when Abbot abruptly drew rein, with a low exclamation. Luis caught sight of the same object a moment later. A small point of light twinkled from amid the trees. The grove was occupied.

"Perhaps it's they—Anita!" muttered Luis, agitatedly.

"Or a party of Indians—more likely. But we'll find out. The moon will not rise for an hour yet. We can crawl up there easily enough, unseen. But our horses? If left, they'd go for water. We must ride around to the other end and tie them."

Luis saw the sound sense of this advice, and the young scouts proceeded to put it into execution, using every precaution not to alarm the campers, whoever they might be. Tying their animals securely, they stole along the edge of the *motte*, and soon reached a point opposite the camp-fire. Thus, as silently as lay in their power, they crawled through the underbrush until they could peer out upon the little glade, in the center of which glowed the fire. It was a far from agreeable sight that they beheld.

Around the fire were seated full a score of Indians, daubed with paint; tall, athletic fellows every one, and of a tribe that neither of the young scouts had ever met before. This much they saw; but no more, just then.

Without a premonitory sound or note, four heavy bodies fell upon their shoulders, holding them powerless. And almost ere they could realize that they were attacked, Luis and Perry were dragged out into the circle of light, bound hand and foot. The stalker had been stalked—they were in the toils, fairly caught.

The Indians jabbered together excitedly for a few moments, and more than one weapon was shaken threateningly above the captives' heads, but the dispute gradually grew less, and the majority evidently were in favor of reserving the captives—for what?

Our friends were not long left in doubt. They were dragged to a large trunked tree, and bound tightly side by side in a sitting position. Thus they could see all that transpired around the fire.

The savages now resumed their interrupted meal. A low cry of unutterable horror broke from the captives' lips. They could no longer doubt the dread truth.

They were captured by Cannibals!

They saw the half-picked bones—the limbs of a pale-face—of a woman! Oh, God! the horrible fear that flashed through their brains!

Was this the end of the lost trail? Anita—had she—!

CHAPTER X.

THE RED HAWKS' NEST.

OLD BULL'S-EYE did not alter his position for fully an hour after the two young scouts left him, unless it was to refill and light his pipe. The last few hours had wrought a great change in him. Before, he had been a restless, rollicking being, his tongue rarely at rest, even while alone; but now, he was strangely subdued, with an earnest, far-away look in his eyes. He seemed another man throughout.

Mounting Snow-squall, he headed almost due west, and giving the noble gray free rein, skimmed swiftly across the desert waste. Before long the prospect changed. He passed through a wide weed prairie, and, not long before sunset, entered the hills among which the Mexican had declared the Red Hawks built their nest. But had he spoken the truth?

Old Bull's-Eye dismounted and stripped Snow-squall, turning him loose to graze at will, knowing well that the faithful animal would not stray far. Concealing saddle and bridle, the old scout selected a high point of ground, and nimbly scaling the hill, glanced keenly around upon the pleasant view. An artist would have been enraptured with the prospect, but Old Bull's-Eye had no eye for the beautiful or picturesque, just then. He was searching for some trace of the outlaws' retreat. He felt confident that he could recognize several of the most prominent landmarks mentioned by his captive, and from these he decided upon the place most likely to be the one. This portion of the scene he examined very minutely, and then, just as the golden fire of the setting sun was paling in the western skies, a low cry burst from the hunter's lips.

A thin column of smoke rising above the hills and hanging in a fleecy cloud around the tree-tops—this is what he saw.

"I reckon that's it," he muttered, carefully noting the direction and probable distance in his mind. "It agrees with what he said. What that's smoke, that's fire, an' most generally it takes human hands to kindle that. An' yit—s'posin' it is them—what kin one man do? Well, time enough fer that question to answer itself. The fust thing is to find out the fire that smoke starts from."

Thus soliloquizing, Old Bull's-Eye rapidly retraced his steps, and calling up Snow-squall, saddled and bridled him.

"Don't fret, old boy," he muttered, soothingly, as the gray stallion whickered in a subdued tone, as though asking why his feast was thus cut short. "You shall hev your fill afore long. That's no tellin' what scrape I may git in over that, an' it may be as well to hev you handy. Foller me, now, an' step light."

Old Bull's-Eye glided rapidly up the little valley, closely followed by Snow-squall, who acted as though he had fully understood his instructions. Though he must have been hungry, he never once attempted to snatch a mouthful of grass, nor to nibble at the leaves of the bushes as he passed them, and planted his feet softly, avoiding the scattered stones as by instinct.

On several occasions Old Bull's-Eye raised his hand and Snow-squall halted, remaining as motionless as though carved from one of the surrounding boulders, nor would he stir until the low whistle of his master signaled him to advance.

When he felt that he was near the spot where he expected to find the outlaws' retreat, Old Bull's-Eye slipped the bits from his horse's mouth, and led him into a little patch of grass surrounded on all sides by bushes and small trees, leaving him to graze. Then he looked to his weapons and rapidly scaled the hill before him. Beyond this had risen the smoke.

The scout, well trained though he undoubtedly was, could scarcely suppress the little cry of exultation that sprung to his lips as he gained the ridge and peered down into the valley. There, not half a mile distant, nestling between the low, tree-crowned hills that surrounded it upon every side, lay a miniature town—as he firmly believed, the nest of the Red Hawks.

The buildings, scarcely distinguishable from each other, appeared to be rude, diminutive structures, raised without regard to regularity, or any thing else but the fancy of the builders. Before several of them were burning small fires, and by this light he could make out an occasional figure passing along the crooked paths that wound through the village. Their race he could not tell. Possibly this was an Indian town. And the fear that such might be the case urged Old Bull's-Eye on, though prudence bade him wait until later, when the occupants would be buried in sleep, before entering the place.

Yet, though he resolved to descend and enter the village at once, Old Bull's-Eye did not neglect any precautions. Using every available point of cover, he glided down the hillside and entered the little valley or basin. The moon had not yet arisen, and though the grass was not high enough to conceal his body as he crawled along, the scout felt little fear of being seen. His danger would be when he had once fairly entered the village.

Half an hour of this work carried him to the nearest cabin. It was built of poles, rudely thatched. The interstices between the poles were partially chinked with dried mud and prairie grass, which had fallen out in many places. He peered in at one of these chinks, but could distinguish nothing. All was dark within. The cabin appeared vacant.

Old Bull's-Eye crawled to the corner of the hut, and glanced rapidly around. Though he could hear the indistinct murmur of human voices, he could see no one, and was still in doubt whether this was the nest, or merely an Indian town.

"Nothin' ventur', nothin' hev, so here goes," muttered Old Bull's-Eye, gliding forward, silently as a bodiless shadow.

He paused at two of the lodges, but could learn nothing. To all appearance they were deserted. But at the third he met with better success. A dull light streamed through the imperfectly-chinked sides, and applying an eye to one of the apertures, the scout beheld four men squatted around a rude lamp, playing cards. They were white men, and at least two were Americans, from their language.

"Ef it's as you say," slowly observed one of the men, while dextrously shuffling the greasy bits of painted pasteboard, "ef it's as you say, things will be worked up right lively in these parts afore long. The boss ain't a man to let anybody cross him, when he gits his mind sot. T'other ain't no slouch, nuther, but I goes my pile on the old man."

"Tain't no sech long odds, Limber Dick," rejoined one of the others. "I war thar, an' sec'd the hull thing. 'You tetch her,' sais Banty, 'you jest lay a crooked dagger on this lady, an' I'll fill your head of fire fuller o' bullets than a gourd is of seeds.' That's jest the words—an' big as he is, Red Jack Hawk took water right peert—you hear me!"

Old Bull's-Eye could scarcely suppress the chuckle of exultation that rose to his lips, as he distinguished these words, for he knew that he had indeed discovered the Hawks' Nest. The quartette kept silence during that hand, but while the cards were being shuffled and dealt, Limber Dick resumed:

"T'war hard on us boys as wasn't a'lowed to j'ine in the fun, fer, by all a'counts, you must 'a' hed a red-hot time. But about the wimmen critters: Long Bob he sais they're all 'sposed of a'ready. Ef this is so, durned ef thar hain't a gwine to be a fust-class ruction in this 'ere outfit. I'm gwine to hev a squaw, or bu'et somethin'."

"Bob lied, I reckon. The boss al'ays acts on the squar' In course he'll claim the gal—old de Sylva's da'ter; but that's his right—hevin' fust pick, I mean. But he said that the captives wasn't to be bothered ontel he got back."

"When will he git back?" persisted Limber Dick.

"Soon es he kin 'spose of the stock. You know the law—no sech drove could be brung hyar, leavin' a trail like as ef a army hed passed. He'll give 'em a good start, then trust the drove to old Opishka Koaki, who'll pastur' 'em nigh his vilage ontel after we've made our big raid down toward Greaserland. Then, with what we raise thar, an' the old Don's herd, we'll strike out fer the big settlements fer a market. See?"

Old Bull's-Eye did not wait to hear what Limber Dick might have to say, for time was passing and he had already gleaned sufficient for his purpose. This was the Hawks' Nest—the majority of the outlaws were absent—Anita de Sylva still lived and was a captive in that very town. True, he had not learned any thing concerning Senor de Sylva, himself, but he *felt* that he was alive and not far distant. Believing this the old scout set about searching for him—or rather the place in which he was confined.

But he left his cover in an unfavorable moment. To gain the next hut, it was necessary for him to cross a strip of ground lighted by a fire a little to the right. The better to avoid discovery, he prostrated himself and crawled forward almost imperceptibly, but paused as he heard a clear, not unmusical whistle, then the quick tread of some one approaching. Peering ahead, through his bushy eyebrows, Old Bull's-Eye distinguished a tall man approaching, in such a course that he could hardly escape discovery. Yet to flee would only precipitate matters, and he lay quiet, only stealing one hand down to his belt, clutching the horn-hafted bowie-knife, ready to deal a stout blow, if necessary.

The whistle ceased abruptly, and Old Bull's-Eye knew that his prostrate figure had been observed. And it was not without a peculiar thrill that he *felt* the outlaw nearing him, curiously. And then the man paused beside him, gently touching the old scout with his foot.

"What's the matter here, friend?" he demanded, evidently little suspecting the identity of the man he was addressing.

Old Bull's-Eye was not very anxious to enlighten him, and moved uneasily, muttering some indistinct words. The outlaw took the bait at once.

"Drunk, eh? Nice discipline, but I ain't boss," and laughing shortly, he passed on, greatly to our old friend's relief.

When convinced that the outlaw was out of sight, Old Bull's-Eye crossed the patch of light, and paused beside the cabin. This was larger than the others, and also better constructed, though of the same materials. With one ear against the wall the spy listened intently. A faint murmuring came indistinctly to his ears, and, resolved to neglect no chance of gleaning the knowledge he sought, Old Bull's-Eye drew his knife and cautiously attacked the chinking. In a few moments he succeeded in removing a fragment, and a ray of light fell across his face. Peering through the aperture, he glanced around the lighted interior. A little cry broke from his lips.

"What ye see in thar that's so interestin'?"

These words were uttered in a low tone, so close to the old scout's ear that he felt the warm breath accompanying them. Turning suddenly, he found himself face to face with a man, who was also kneeling. Old Bull's-Eye had been so absorbed in his ticklish work of opening a crevice unheard by those within the cabin, that he had failed to note the approach of the outlaw, whose curiosity had doubtless been aroused by the actions of the eavesdropper.

The moon, in its full, was just rising above the hilltop, and cast a silvery beam fairly athwart the face of the scout as he instinctively turned his head. The inquisitive outlaw started back with a sharp cry of surprise. Old Bull's-Eye was recognized by an old enemy.

There was but one course for him to pursue. The cry had alarmed the inmates of the cabin, and from the bustle, they were evidently about to emerge. The alarm would become general, and only instant flight could save the daring scout. Unfortunately there was a substantial obstacle in the way—six feet of solid flesh and bones.

Quick as thought, Old Bull's-Eye lunged out with the knife that he still held in his hand, and before the astonished Hawk could spring back, the long blade was buried to its very haft in his breast. A wild, horrible yell of agony parted his lips. Yet, though the blow was fatal, the stricken man plunged forward and grappled with his slayer.

The village was now all confusion. The first cry had been heard, the last one told the listening outlaws in which direction to look, and nearly half a hundred persons were rushing from the huts in every direction.

With a furious curse, Old Bull's-Eye tore himself free, and leaped to his feet, only to see a man rushing upon him with uplifted knife. Bounding back a pace, he drew a revolver and discharged it point-blank in the outlaw's face. He fell without a groan. But matters looked dark for the daring scout. He was surrounded. From every side came the Hawks, scenting blood, yelling loudly, brandishing such weapons as they had snatched up at the first alarm. All seemed lost. Yet Old Bull's-Eye did not despair. This was not the first time he had found himself in a tight place, from which escape appeared impossible. Experience taught him that a single man can do much, provided he does not lose his head, and grasps at every chance.

With a quick glance he picked out the weakest point in the cordon, and rushed toward it, his revolver speaking rapidly. The moon gave light enough, and at such short range a marksman of his skill needed not to fire twice at the same target. The outlaws fell before him in rapid succession. But others took their place, while the yells from behind and upon either side sounded close. Old Bull's-Eye saw that this hope was futile. No single man could break through such a cordon. And grating his teeth with furious rage, he sprang aside and stood against the cabin, resolved to make it a dead victory for the Hawks. At least they could not attack him in the rear. And from the front they must advance in the face of his revolver.

"Though with every second one of their number fell, dead

or dying, the outlaws rushed closer, having confidence in their numbers. The foremost men fell rapidly, but then Old Bull's-Eye found that his last charge was spent, as the hammer fell sullenly upon the uncovered nipple. Yet he did not yield. Grasping the pistols by the barrels, he dealt furious blows upon every side, raging like a caged lion.

But there is a limit to man's power, and the scout fell beneath the pile of outlaws, whose strong hands clutched his every limb. Yet, while thus hampered, he struggled furiously, nor did he desist while his strength lasted. Then, overpowered but not conquered, the old man was lifted upon his feet, firmly held by his captors, and dragged toward the nearest fire.

"Who are you, anyhow?" fiercely demanded one of his captors, peering keenly into the scout's face by the flickering light.

"It's that cuss—Old Bull's-Eye!" cried a man, hustily, who staggered forward with a knife, making a quick stroke at the hunter's breast; but even in the act, he fell forward, dead.

"That's my name, gentlemen—Old Bull's-Eye," proudly said the scout.

A united yell of execration arose. That name was well known. Its bearer had many sins to answer for, in their estimation. His hand had lain low many a stout Hawk. And wild yells rent the air, yells that called for vengeance. A score of weapons gleamed above the captive's head. Death seemed inevitable, yet Old Bull's-Eye did not flinch. He even laughed low and tauntingly, in the very faces of his foes.

"Hold there—for shame!" cried a clear, ringing voice, and a light figure pressed through the mad crowd. "Fifty men upon one—and ye call yourselves men?"

Old Bull's-Eye gazed in amazement upon the one who dared so much to save him. A woman—but little more than a girl. Yet she did not flinch from the brandished weapons.

"Down with her, too! Kill them both!" yelled the Hawks.

"Stand back! The first man who lifts a weapon dies!"

And with a cocked revolver in either hand, she proudly defied the crowd.

CHAPTER IX

CARMELA.

DON CRESPIÑO MONTALADO rode close beside Anita de Sylva, as they turned their backs upon the blazing ranch, his arm ready to support the maiden in case of need. But though she had not entirely recovered from the terrible shock, seeming dazed and stupefied, Anita was capable of sitting her mustang.

The main body of the Red Hawks were busied in keeping the droves of cattle in a compact shape, and were already far in advance, the wild stampede carrying them over half a dozen miles before it could be checked. The gray-haired woman was riding with red-headed Jack Hawk, who addressed her as Chiquita, and was in the best of humors, judging from her frequent bursts of laughter. With this party were several litters, containing the more seriously wounded of their comrades, who were unable to sit their horses.

Thus they pressed on through the night, nor did they draw rein until the gray light in the far east heralded the approach of the day-god. This was upon the edge of a water-course, and though their animals were not greatly fatigued, having traveled quite leisurely, there being little or no fear of pursuit, preparations were made for quite a halt. The saddle animals were picketed out to graze, lest they should take a fancy to join the big drove that steadily wound its way over the plain. Jack Hawk had formed all his plans beforehand, and now every man understood the duty he was to perform. The captured stock were to be driven direct to the hunting-ground of Opishka Koaki, the Kiowa chief, there to remain in pasture until after the great raid southward. As it would be imprudent to halt until plenty of water was reached, the drivers kept on, heading for the river, as the water-hole alluded to could not supply the large herd.

On halting, Montalado singled Anita's maid out from the lot of captives, and bade her attend to her mistress. The faithful half-breed had clung to the bundle she had formed of her mistress' clothes, through all the long night's walk, and now attired Anita more comfortably, though their dressing-room was quite spacious and rather more public than agreeable, but thanks to the vigilance of Don Montalado, the act was accomplished in tolerable comfort.

Montalado acted the devoted cavalier to perfection, arranging a comfortable couch for Anita, procuring and superintending the cooking of a choice bit of beef fresh from a slaughtered animal, and with his own hands brewing a cup of strong coffee. But, as may readily be imagined, Anita had anything but a good appetite. The events of that night had stunned her. The sight of her father lying so cold and still—the ruthless massacre—the blazing buildings, the home of her childhood—and then the cruel words of Chiquita—"Look, Anita de Sylva—look at the red blaze—see how it springs up! And your father lies in there dead!"

All this came back to her ears as she crouched there, her head bowed upon her hands, great tears trickling through fingers. She wondered why she had been spared—for seemed nothing on earth for her to live for now.

At length, tired of trying to arouse her, Montalado passed over to where Chiquita sat, beside one of the litters, eating and drinking. The two engaged in conversation, that, despite their low, guarded tones, appeared to be any thing but amicable. But it was suddenly cut short.

A faint cry—a shrill scream—a loud curse, and then the sound of a heavy, crashing blow. These sounds startled them, and glancing hastily in the direction from whence they proceeded, Don Montalado uttered a sharp oath, and drawing a revolver, sprung rapidly forward.

The outlaw chief, Jack Hawk, was the prime cause of the disturbance. He had been drinking just enough to make him reckless and brutal, and seeing the fair Anita sitting with only her maid for company, he approached them and flung himself upon the couch at the maiden's feet. This served to arouse Anita from her stupor, drawing a cry of terror from her lips. With a harsh, inarticulate cry, Josefa, the deaf mute, sprung upon him like a wildcat in defense of her young; and buried her fingers in the giant's matted crop of fiery red hair, pulling and tugging like one possessed. With a howl of rage and pain the ruffian dashed his clenched fist with terrific force full against her temple. She fell, without a groan. She lifted her eyes to her mistress' face, with a look of unutterable affection, and sought to clasp her feet, but in vain. Death claimed its victim.

"Back there, you cowardly cur!" cried a sharp voice, and Red Hawk turned only to confront the black muzzle of a revolver. "Back, I say, or I'll send you to the devil, your master, without time to mutter a prayer. The lady is under my protection, and in insulting her you insult me. Bah! none of your awful scowls, Redhead; you can't impose on nature, who gave you a face that just fits your soul."

"You—you dare to jaw me—you little imp—you grasshopper!" spluttered Jack Hawk, his face turning purple with rage.

"I dare almost any thing, old man," was the quiet reply. "Let me tell you one thing. If ever you dare to address this lady unless with perfect respect, I swear that I will shoot you like a dog. You know me, and can judge whether I'll keep my word or not. And now, as a polite hint, let me tell you that we greatly prefer your room to your company."

Fairly speechless with rage, the outlaw chief drew a pistol from his belt, but his hand was caught by Chiquita, who said:

"That is my child, Hawk. Think twice before you make enemies of us both. Look at the men—why if I but lift my finger, you would be torn limb from limb."

"Let her mind her tongue, then," he muttered, sullenly, as he realized the truth of what Chiquita said. "I'd rather be stabbed with a knife twice than once with her tongue."

"Keep your distance, then, most noble captain, and I'll not molest you. There are certain animals one prefers not to fight, if a collision can be avoided."

"Be quiet, Carmela—you forget yourself," sternly said Chiquita, as she drew the enraged outlaw away.

"She called you Carmela!" murmured Anita, as the person whom we have heretofore known as Don Montalado stepped forward.

"That is my name, and I am a woman, like yourself, lady," and a faint flush appeared upon the smooth cheek. "But, believe me, I am not so bad as I seem. I will tell you my story as soon as we are away from these disagreeable friends of mine. But first this poor girl must be looked after. Poor thing! She gave her life for you, but perhaps she is better off now—who knows?"

Carmela, as she must now be termed—summoned two men who dug a shallow grave beside the water-course, and the two women gently laid her to rest. And Anita murmured a prayer over the little mound.

Shortly afterward Carmela called a tall, scarred old man to her, and gave him some directions. He quickly prepared their horses, and led them forward. Carmela assisted Anita to mount and sprung into the saddle herself just as Jack Hawk strode forward, scowling deeply.

"Where are you going, girl?" he demanded, sharply.

"On a voyage of discovery—to the moon," laughed Carmela, but with a dangerous glitter in her black eyes.

"You are going to stay and keep me company, so you might as well dismount without any more words."

"Who says so?"

"I!"

"Indeed! Then listen to what I say. Garcia," she added, turning to the lame outlaw, "is your rifle loaded?"

"Senzorita," and the grim veteran cocked the weapon.

"Good! Now listen. Unless this gentleman retreats to his own fire, yonder, before I can count twenty, you will see how well he can stand fire. And don't waste your bullet."

Garcia leveled his rifle, the double sights bearing full upon the outlaw chief's head, while Carmela deliberately began to count. For a moment Red Hawk hesitated, but then, completely cowed, he turned and strode rapidly away.

With a clear, ringing laugh, Carmela gave her animal free rein, and with Anita beside her, and the imperturbable Garcia close upon their heels, the trio galloped off into the desert, while Jack Hawk, cursing horribly, shook his clenched fist after them in impotent rage.

For hour after hour the trio rode on, in almost entire silence. Anita could not forget her terrible loss. Carmela seemed deep buried in thought. At noon they halted at a little spring, surrounded by a grove of trees—the same spot where Old Bull's-Eye found the trail that caused Luis and Perry to separate from him. Here Garcia roasted a portion of meat that he had brought from the camp for the girls, and while they

were eating it, with an appetite sharpened by the long ride, he cooked the remainder to keep it from spoiling. Then, after a couple of hours' rest, they resumed their journey.

Nothing of importance occurred during the afternoon ride. For the most part it was over a level waste of sand, rendered oppressive by the blazing rays of the sun refracted from the bright crystals. An hour or so before sunset they entered upon the rocky tract where, a day later, Luis de Sylva and Perry Abbot lost their trail. Better informed than they, lame Garcia led the way into a narrow, rock-paved trail, and they halted for the night at a small spring, securely sheltered by overhanging rocks, where their camp-fire could not be seen half a dozen rods away. At this place Carmela told Anita the story of her life, or a portion of it, and pledged herself to see that the maiden came to no harm at the hands of Red Hawk, though she refused to return with Anita to the ruined rancho. And that night was spent tightly locked in each other's arms, with grim old Garcia keeping watch and ward over them.

It was nearly noon when they entered the Hawks' Nest, finding a large portion of the outlaws there before them, but Hawk was absent, seeing the stolen cattle well under way for the Kiowas' grounds. There was a stormy meeting between Chiquita and Carmela, the former accusing the daughter of wishing to break her solemn oath of vengeance against all in whose veins flowed the blood of de Sylva. This Carmela denied, but it was with a feeling in her heart that the accusation was true. She had almost learned to love the Spanish maiden, and the doom that had been pronounced against her grew more and more repulsive with every hour.

The two maidens ate supper together, Carmela once more clothed in the garb suitable for her sex, though it would scarcely pass muster on Broadway, being that of an Indian girl, tunic, skirt, leggins and moccasins. Drawing together, they conversed in low, eager tones. Carmela was still angry from the interview with her mother, and perhaps was led into saying more than she would under other circumstances.

"You know the worst, now," she said. "You are to be given to Red Hawk, for his wife—a doom far worse than death—the drunken, foul-mouthed, hideous boor! But I swear that he shall not harm you, if you only trust in me. As soon as he returns, he intends making a grand raid into Texas and passing across the Rio Grande. You must receive him as well as you can—ask for time to mourn for your father and brother. He will grant it, I doubt not, especially when I swear that I'll stand no brutal treatment. Then, when they are gone, we can easily slip off, and I will see you safe with your friends, or at least leave you in charge of some honest people—"

At this moment they were interrupted by a wild yell, and then followed the report of fire-arms, the shouts and curses of men in mortal struggle. Seizing her weapons, Carmela rushed forth. She saw the terrible fight for life made by Old Bull's-Eye, and felt her heart swell strangely at the desperate valor of the old man who flinched not from the heavy odds. And when he was finally overpowered, she pressed forward, eager to see who had displayed such wondrous prowess. It was the face of an entire stranger, yet, when a score throats vociferated for his blood, when as many weapons were uplifted to cut him down, she could stand it no longer, and pushing through the crowd, held them at bay with her revolvers, thrusting first at one, then another, with the black muzzles.

"Back! ye cowards—stand back, or by the spirits above, I'll let out more of your black hearts' blood than ye can well spare. Fifty men upon one—for shame!"

"Look what he's done—killed or crippled a dozen of us. Stand aside, girl, or you will get injured," angrily cried one of the outlaws, crouching for a leap.

Carmela swiftly turned her pistol upon him, and it seemed as though she would fire; but just then there came a startling interruption. Wild, shrill and piercing arose the yell that could not be mistaken—the charging yell of the red-men. And with it came the swift rush of many feet.

CHAPTER XII.

DOG EAT DOG.

It was the war-cry of the terrible Cayguas—those Ishmaelites of the desert, whose record for ferocity, daring and thirst for blood stands unequalled in the annals of the South-west. Their home in a rocky, rugged tract of ground, a natural fortress, surrounded upon every side by miles upon miles of dreary, waterless desert, the next thing to impassable, they made constant forays, striking at red-skin and white alike—at peace with none, at war with all. And though they took many captives, few, if any, ever returned to their people to tell of what they saw. *Because the Cayguas were cannibals.*

Yelling, screeching like very fiends of hell, the Cayguas charged upon the surprised outlaws, sending before them a flight of their red and black-barred arrows. Charging upon horseback and upon foot, wielding bow, spear and war-club studded thick with pointed knobs of the green flint of their native hills. Seeming to spring up from the very ground. Coming from every part of the compass. Surrounding the Hawks' Nest with a circle of death. Charging just in time to save Old Bull's-Eye and the daring Carmela from falling a sacrifice beneath the thirsty weapons of the enraged Hawks. The surprise was complete. Few of the outlaws had fire-

arms with them, for the most of them had been lying down, worn out by their long, arduous ride, when Old Bull's-Eye was discovered. And for a few moments all was confusion, as the outlaws rushed in wild haste for their weapons.

"You saved my life, gal, an' I'm thankful for it," hurriedly uttered Old Bull's-Eye. "But I reckon we're both gone up now."

"Here—take this," and Carmela thrust a weapon into his hand, at the same time shooting down one of the foremost savages, who was urging his half-tamed mustang toward them. "Keep by me—I know where there are plenty of weapons."

"I'll do it—never fear. You saved my life—I'll see ef I can't save you now," cried the scout, as he shielded Carmela with his own body, coolly picking off the Cayguas one after another, slowly retreating as directed by the maiden.

A mounted Caygua, his long hair floating behind him like a cloud, thickly studded with nuggets of gold, charged with leveled spear upon the hunter, whose revolver was already emptied. With a sudden twist of his body, Old Bull's-Eye suffered the weapon to pass between his arm and side, then sprung forward like an enraged jaguar and tore the brawny brute from his horse, flinging him senseless to the ground.

"Quick—in here!" cried Carmela, flinging open the door of the cabin. "Here are weapons—all loaded!"

Old Bull's-Eye sprung across the threshold and grasped the brace of revolvers handed him by Carmela. And then, standing in the doorway, he discharged shot after shot with unerring precision. Never before had the Cayguas encountered such a terrible foe. As many braves fell before that door as in the fight with all of the outlaws.

The Red Hawks had sprung for their firearms but in gaining them they were necessarily separated, an advantage that the enemy did not fail to improve. With three or four redskins who knew not the meaning of the word fear, rushing upon each one of the outlaws, there could be but one ending, despite the advantage the Hawks possessed in the matter of arms. Not a dozen, all told, of the Cayguas possessed firearms. But they made good use of their spears, their bows and arrows—the former made of splints of the buffalo-horn, curiously bound together—their stone hatchets and war-clubs. One by one the Red Hawks fell, fighting desperately, knowing the horrible doom that awaited them if taken alive. Red and white blood flowed like water, standing in sickening, streaming pools all over the hard, beaten ground.

Prominent among the defenders was Chiquita, the gray-haired. Wherever her shrill voice sounded, there the Red Hawks rallied and fought the most stubbornly—the blood flowed like water, and death reigned triumphant. She seemed like one inspired. The long, frosted locks, that hung below her waist, her eyes glaring, her face lighted up with an almost maniacal fire—she rushed to and fro like some warlike prophetess of old, urging her followers to strike home, unheeding the missiles that fell all around her, untouched, though made an especial target by a score of marksmen. She seemed to bear a charmed life.

A Caygua fell from his horse with a shattered leg. He emptied his quiver at the Red Hawks. Then he dragged himself to one of the fires blazing before a cabin, and unheeding the frightful burns he received, grasped the glowing brands and flung them upon the dry thatched roof. Almost instantly the hut was whapped in a blaze. The wind was blowing freshly, and the savage yelled aloud with exultation as he saw a fiery tongue leap across and seize upon the next hut. And thus a new horror was added to the thrilling scene.

A dozen times had the Cayguas charged toward the hut defended by Old Bull's-Eye, and as often were the survivors repulsed, leaving the ground covered with their dead or disabled comrades. The cabin contained a large supply of weapons, and Carmela dexterously reloaded them as fast as the scout could empty their chambers. Standing a little within the empty doorway, Old Bull's-Eye was invisible from without, save when the flash of his weapons lighted up his form.

But the end was nigh. The Red Hawks, though fighting with unusual desperation and valor, were falling rapidly before their numerous assailants. Weight of numbers will tell even when they are less reckless than were the Cayguas. And then the conflagration was swiftly spreading, leaping from hut to hut, lapping up the dry, frail and tinder-like structures with wonderful rapidity.

"We must make a break, little one," muttered Old Bull's-Eye, as he cast a swift glance around. "In ten minutes thar won't be a livin' white in this place, unless they're captives. It's a tough chance, but mebbe we kin make the timber. Will you risk it?"

"There is a lady—Anita de Sylva—in one of those huts. I must save her, first," excitedly cried Carmela, as a shrill, piercing scream came from the other side of the village. "I had forgotten her until now."

"It can't be did—no livin' body could cut his way to that cabin, from hyer. Stop! you saved my life, an' blest ef I see you kill yourself like that," cried the scout, forcibly restraining her. "Jest look yonder—thar's fifty redskins atween us an' her. You see what a fool trick it'd be?"

"Yes—I see, now. But you—perhaps you can escape to the woods—here are two revolvers, loaded. Go!"

"Not without you, little one. I'll take you through safe, or else we'll go under together. See—ketch hold o' my belt—don't let go, for your life. You'll need it to keep up with me. I reckon I'll hev to do some shootin' afore we get through."

During this hasty conversation, the old scout was making

preparations for his desperate venture. The roof of the cabin that sheltered them had caught, and was now one mass of fire. The heat was already intense. There was no time to be lost.

Carmela seeing that she was powerless to aid Anita, whom, until then, she had entirely forgotten in the horrible tumult and excitement, no longer offered any resistance, and wound her little hand in Old Bull's-Eye's belt as he directed. And then the scout dashed out from the blazing hut, a revolver ready cocked in each hand, and darted toward the woods. Fortunately his stand had been taken near the eastern extremity of the village, and he had not many yards to pass before the town would be cleared. Of course the majority of the Indians were to the west of him, only a few being near.

But they were not to escape unmolested. Scarce had they emerged from the blazing cabin, when, with a wild yell of exultation, a mounted Caygua leveled his lance that was dripping with blood, and dashed down upon the fugitives.

Lightning was not quicker than Old Bull's-Eye's action. Whirling half-around, he fired twice in rapid succession, the second shot fairly scorching the forelock of the half-trained mustang, so little space separated them. The Caygua fell like a log. His mustang reared aloft with a snort of terror, and seemed about to crush the scout beneath its wildly-pawing hoofs. But with an adroit leap, Old Bull's-Eye grasped its steaming nostrils, and brought the animal down, quiet and subdued.

"Quick—jump up, little one!" he cried, hurriedly. "Thar's more o' the varmints a-comin'—make haste!"

Without a word Carmela nimbly sprung upon the panther-skin that had served the Caygua for a saddle, and Old Bull's-Eye changed his grasp to the long, plaited mane, urging the mustang forward at top speed. The act was observed by several of the Cayguas, and they darted forward to kill or capture the fugitives. But in ten seconds more, the trio, horse, rider and runner were swallowed up in the shades of the woods, and the Indians turned aside in quest of an easier prey.

Pulling hard upon the rawhide rein that was looped around the mustang's lower jaw, Carmela succeeded in checking its furious speed, that endangered all their lives, over that rough trail. Bending her head she addressed Old Bull's-Eye.

"You had better mount, too, senor. We may be pursued, and you would be captured on foot."

"Not me, little one—over this ground I can outrun the best horse ever foaled, and the red-skin don't live that I can't show my back to in a fair foot-race. But my horse is over that way—we must make a turn to the left."

"Very well—lead the way. It's a pleasure to trust in such a man as you have proved yourself, senor," earnestly replied Carmela.

"Thank you, little one. You kin trust me, anyhow. Only fer you them white Injuns 'd 'a' rubbed me out."

"You forget that I am—or was—one of those white Indians," said Carmela, smiling faintly, her cheek glowing. "But lead on—we are not out of danger yet."

Turning abruptly to the left, Old Bull's-Eye led the way up the gentle slope, little dreaming how near they had been to running headlong into the arms of deadly enemies, for a body of Cayguas were holding the only pass that led from the basin. Only that they knew this and felt confident that the fugitives would be intercepted there, the Cayguas who had started after our friends would not have relinquished the chase so easily.

From the top of the ridge, Old Bull's-Eye and Carmela gazed down upon the thrilling scene. The village was one mass of flames, every hut being on fire. They could hear the wild yells and piercing shrieks, but could distinguish little beside the sea of fire. Carmela covered her eyes and shuddered with horror. Her home had been cast in this valley for years. She had many friends among the rough, rude outlaws. Her mother was there—perhaps dead. Little wonder that she was deeply affected.

"Come, little one," at length said Old Bull's-Eye. "I kin judge pretty nigh what you're thinkin', but it can't do no good our settin' here. Them pesky varmints 'll soon be a-trailsin' over these hills lookin' for sech as may hev got away from them down thar, an' 'twouldn't be healthy fer us to be found, I don't reckon. Come, let's be travelin'."

"Where are you going? What do you intend doing?"

"Fust, I'm goin' to git my rifle an' hoss. Next, I'm goin' to hang round these cussed Cayguas ontel I find out who they've tuck captive," was the quiet reply.

"I am with you in that, senor. Though I am only a girl, you will not find me an incumbrance. 'Twill not be my first attempt at scouting, nor at fighting, if it comes to that," replied Carmela, dashing the tears from her eyes.

Their hands—hers so small and soft, his so brown and horny—met in a warm grip. It was the silent vow of friendship—henceforward they were comrades. And then they descended the slope, and ten minutes later Old Bull's-Eye held his trusty rifle and bestrode the proud Snow-squall.

Like one held spellbound by the fascinating orbs of the rattlesnake, Anita stood in the low doorway of the rude cabin, gazing upon the scene of confusion, of bloodshed and death. She saw the fierce charge boldly met and repulsed, only to be repeated; the wild confused struggle as the foes met and closed in a death grapple, rolling over and over the ground, biting, tearing, snarling like maddened beasts; she saw the exultant Caygua strike down his foe, and then strip off the scalp, flinging the gory trophy aloft with a yell of devilish triumph. She saw the blazing cabins, heard the crackling of the devouring

flames, and felt the intense heat parching her lips and throat. Yet she could not move—could not flee—some strange spell held her motionless.

An athletic Caygua, a giant even among his brawny comrades, struck down a wounded outlaw, before her very face, and tore off the disgusting trophy, brushing it across his own blood-stained face with a howl of ferocious delight. At that moment he caught sight of Anita, and darted forward like a tiger leaping upon its prey. But there was something in the maiden's face marvelously beautiful despite the look of horror frozen upon it, that stayed the red fiend's arm, and the gory knife suak to his side, a glow of brutal admiration filled his eyes, and with a satisfied grunt, he seized Anita by the arm. This touch broke the spell, and she uttered the piercing shriek that attracted Carmela's attention. But struggle as she might Anita was unable to break loose from her captor, who, in an uncouth, guttural dialect, was, doubtless, expressing his thanks for the prize the fortunes of war had thrown into his hands.

The fight was over—the massacre ended. Of all those who had been in the Hawks' Nest at nightfall, scarce one dozen remained alive. Only Old Bull's-Eye and Carmela had escaped. The remainder were either dead or captives.

With a short, peculiar whoop, the Caygua called a young brave to him, and with a few hasty words placed Anita in his charge.

The horrible orgie that followed their victory can not be described here. It was too devilish—too revolting. Let it suffice that the Cayguas are cannibals—that they invariably celebrated a victory by roasting and devouring their dead enemies. And when captives were taken, they were reserved for the same horrible fate, the feast generally taking place at the Cayguas' village after their return from war.

And it was in the hands of such fiends that Anita de Sylva now found herself! But she was spared the horror of knowing the real fate in store for her, at least for a few hours. The brave in whose care the giant chief had placed her, joined the others of his comrades who were guarding the captives taken, and then they slowly left the village. Had this precaution not been taken, the captives would have been massacred by the frantic cannibals as their orgie deepened.

Among the captives, Anita recognized Chiquita, whose haggard face lighted up with an expression of joy almost fiendish, as she saw that the maiden whom she hated so intensely was yet alive. A sudden death would not have satisfied her vengeance. And then she fairly gnashed her teeth as she glared around in search of another face. It was not to be seen.

Through the narrow pass the party wound, and when near its outer extremity, one of the braves uttered a low signal, which was promptly answered. The next minute they were with another band of Cayguas, some twenty in number, who had been left there to cut off the retreat of the pale-faces, should any attempt to escape by the defile.

Anita suddenly uttered a sharp scream, and breaking from the grasp upon her arm, darted forward and knelt beside two bound forms.

"Luis—Perry—you too—oh, God! this is too much!"

With an angry yell a huge Caygua leaps forward, and winding his hand in the maiden's hair, uplifts his heavy stone hatchet!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MAN-EATERS.

SHUDDERINGLY Anita closed her eyes and awaited the blow. Luis and Perry, bound hand and foot, beyond the possibility of interfering, could only glare madly at the brutal savage, whose worst passions were aroused, whose evil eyes glared, whose lips seemed fairly watering at thoughts of the feast of blood before him.

But he was disappointed. Before the weapon could descend upon the golden-haired maiden's head, a strong hand arrested the blow and hurled the savage rudely aside. This interruption came from the brave in whose care Anita had been placed by the giant chief. And after a few angry words, the would-be murderer slunk away, while Anita was led away and secured to a small tree. She could just distinguish the prostrate figures of her brother and her lover—for such Perry Abbot was, though their acquaintance could be measured by months—but dare not attempt to communicate with either. The black eyes of the young brave never left her face for a moment, as he stood beside her. Truly, the giant Caygua had chosen a rare guardian for his captive.

The remaining hours of that eventful night passed away, and day dawned. There had been little rest or sleep for either the captives or the savages. The wild yells and screeches of the Cayguas at their cannibal feast prevented this. It seemed as though all the fiends of the infernal regions had been loosed upon earth.

The sun was just rising above the eastern horizon, when the war-party took up the trail that led to their far-distant desert home. They had gained little by their last exploit. The Red Hawks' principal source of revenue was live stock, which, from policy, they never took to the nest. Hence the Cayguas only captured some four-score horses, the saddle animals of the outlaws they had fought and killed. Besides these, a dozen captives, nine pale-faces, three Kiowas. A number of the horses were loaded with weapons, but not one among all the Cayguas understood the art of using fire-arms.

And for this trifling booty, they had lost, in dead and crippled, over half a hundred warriors. Truly, the captives were not to be envied. Upon them would be wreaked the vengeance demanded by the spirits of the dead braves.

The Cayguas did not suffer the grass to grow beneath their feet. They made a forced march that day, leaving the wooded hills far behind them, crossing straight as the flight of a wild pigeon, the almost limitless weed prairie, heading direct for their desert home. It was a sore trial for the captives. No mercy was shown them. They were forced to keep pace with their mounted captors, afoot. If one lagged or faltered, a flint-tipped spear spurred his failing energy. To sink was death. And the wretched beings struggled on through the thick, tangled weeds and grass that in places were above their heads, rarely being less than waist high. Their treatment, in the face of the fact that scores of unriden horses were being driven along, was plain proof that the captives were doomed to suffer death. If they had been reserved as slaves, the Cayguas would have been more considerate of their strength.

Anita de Sylva alone was more considerately treated. Her captor, the Caygua war-chief, could afford to indulge his sudden fancy for a pale squaw, and even his cruel, crime-stained heart had been touched by the wonderful beauty of the golden-haired sun-child. He saw that she was mounted upon a gentle, easy-paced mustang, and that day's journey was one long, ridiculous struggle between his savage pride and the not passion that had filled his heart. Anita shrank, trembling, sick at heart, filled with loathing and horror as she encountered his ardent glances. The fate in store for her seemed worse than death.

Halting only once during the day, at a small water-course, the Cayguas pressed on until sunset, when they went into camp at a small grove of trees that bordered a good-sized pond fed by living springs. With heartfelt sighs of relief, the exhausted captives flung themselves down to rest. They little dreamed of what the next hour would bring forth.

A number of the Cayguas drew aside and consulted together with evident earnestness. Then two of their number approached the giant chief, Shkote-nah, who was smoking his pipe at the feet of his fair captive, and made known their cause of complaint, whatever it might be. His highness gave an indolent sign of assent, scarce removing his eyes from Anita's face. What was the life of any other captive to him? Nothing.

A little yell of delight went up from the Cayguas as their spokesman returned, and they crowded around the captives, who lay bound upon the hot ground. Though probably not one of the prisoners understood the uncouth dialect, the looks of the savages warned them of danger.

Finally one of the men, a tall, shapely Kiowa brave, whose limbs and body were scarred and hacked with a score of fresh wounds, telling that he had played his part in the Hawks' Nest tragedy right manfully, until a sturdy blow felled him senseless, was selected and dragged near the center of the little glade by the yelling, hooting, dancing Cayguas.

One of the savages severed the Kiowa's bonds, and while the others stood around to guard against any desperate attempt at escape, he delivered a brief, emphatic speech, but which, unfortunately, was Greek to all but himself and comrades. But the Kiowa understood that he was doomed, and in a deep, sonorous voice, chanted forth his death-song. The Cayguas listened in profound silence, until the chant ceased and the warrior bowed his head to receive the death-blow.

Anita closed her eyes with a cry of horror, but she could not shut out the dull, sickening *thud* as the heavy stone hatchet beat out the captive's brains.

As the Kiowa fell, the Cayguas united their voices in a shrill chant, weird and unearthly, keeping time with a slow, swaying motion of their bodies. The executioner dropped his hatchet, and, with one of the steel knives captured at the Hawks' Nest, slashed open the dead brave's breast and extracted the heart. This he cut into small bits, giving each one of the braves a piece, which was immediately swallowed raw.

But why enter into the revolting details? It was a cannibal feast, participated in by those braves who had been denied the indulgence at the Hawks' Nest. Even this brief mention would have been omitted, only, in dealing with the once-powerful nation of the Cayguas, one cannot entirely ignore this, their principal religious rite. This tribe, together with the Club Indians, were the only savages in the South-west positively known as cannibals. The latter were wiped from the face of the earth by small-pox; the Cayguas were annihilated by the Comanches, in 1859, though they were originally of the same family. But this is a digression.

The night was far spent when the terrible ceremony came to an end, and the Cayguas settled themselves down to sleep. Several braves were stationed around the bound captives, but more as a matter of form than in expectation that any attempt at escape would be made. Cunning hands had applied the rawhide thongs too securely for that.

One by one the sentinels suffered slumber to overpower them. For nearly a week they had been constantly upon the move, scarce taking time to eat and drink, much less sleep. So it was not strange that, three hours before daydawn, the entire camp was wrapped in slumber, unless with the exception of some miserable captive.

And one other—a shadowy, ill-defined figure was cautiously, noiselessly creeping through the camp. The keenest ear could not have detected a sound to betray that the phantom was mortal flesh and blood.

The shadow crept on, winding through the close-lying sav-

ages with the skill and adroitness of a serpent, until surrounded by near two hundred ferocious, blood-loving fiends, whom the faintest unusual sound would arouse, when death to the bold intruder must follow. Yet, with a rare nerve and coolness, the shadow stole on, pressed through the thickest ranks of the slumberers, and gradually neared the spot where the captives lay bound. One hand clasped a knife, whose bright blade occasionally reflected the red glow cast out by the ash-covered coals as they broke and fell apart. Long hair hung over his face. Whether of white or red blood could only be surmised.

The shadow at length gained the group of captives, and bending over, peered keenly into each face as he crawled on. He seemed searching for some one in particular—one whom he could not find. And then he paused beside Chiquita, bending his head until his hair nearly swept her face. At this moment her eyes opened, to meet the fiery orbs glaring into hers. A wild, terrified shriek broke from her lips—a shriek that aroused the entire camp.

The adventurer leaped erect, and darted over the bound forms toward the nearest cover. A brawny Caygua, one of the somnoient sentinels, scarce awake, endeavored to arrest him. Swift as thought, the long blade of the knife was buried to the hilt in his bosom, and a gurgling, stifled death-yell was added to the wild uproar. And two seconds later came the rapid thud of a horse's hoofs upon the hard-baked ground.

Anticipating an immediate attack the Cayguas flocked around their captives with ready weapons. But it did not come. The hours slowly rolled by, and the dawn came. The prairie was bare as far as the eye could reach of aught save the rank weeds and grass. Scouts were sent out, while a couple of horses were slaughtered for food. The rude meal hastily dispatched, the Cayguas mounted and resumed their journey. The scouts soon overtook them, and reported. They had been unable to find any trail save that which their own party had made. The giant chief looked uneasy. Superstitious, like all of his race, he believed that some evil spirit was haunting them, especially as one and all of the sentinels solemnly declared that they had not closed an eye during the past night, and that it would have been impossible for a living being to have entered the camp unperceived.

As before, Shkote-nah kept Anita close beside him, and seemed desirous of rendering the toilsome journey as comfortable as possible. The other captives had occasion to bless the strange intruder of the past night, for in their haste to reach home, the Cayguas had furnished each with a horse.

Their course was over a vast, undulating prairie, through dried weeds and grass that crackled and snapped beneath the trampling of hoofs. At noon they halted for a rest, their animals showing signs of fatigue, owing to the difficult traveling through the matted weeds. It was a cheerless halt. There was no water. They dared not venture to kindle a fire, for the slightest spark might set a terrible blaze that would devour everything.

All at once the sound of fire-arms startled them, coming from beyond the swell they had last passed. A brave hastened back, and his cries from the hill-top told his comrades what was going on. Some of the Cayguas had loitered behind the main body, and were now engaged in a desperate fight for life. A score of Cayguas mounted and hastened to their comrades' assistance. Then, as the captives listened intently, hoping and praying that it might be a strong party of friends who would rescue them, the sounds of conflict died away.

And once more the war-party hastened on. More hours of weary, toilsome riding beneath the blazing sun, their lips cracked and swollen, their throats parched and thirst intensified by the impalpable dust that arose from the crushed weeds. The air was like that of a furnace, hot and suffocating. Even the desert-born Cayguas appeared to suffer. Shkote-nah kept close beside Anita, but his eyes were fixed ahead, as though looking for the appearance of some dreaded enemy.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHASING AND CHASED.

MEANWHILE Carmela and Old Bull's-Eye had not been idle. They had hovered around until the Cayguas took up their long trail, and then entered the ruins of the Hawks' Nest. It was a picture of dire desolation. Little heaps of ashes marked where the rude cabins had stood. A sickening scent of charred flesh hung heavily upon the morning air. Slowly they moved through the barrier, eagerly searching for what they dreaded to find. Scores of bodies lay around, but all so mangled and disfigured as to defy recognition; the bodies of men, women and children, but all of them once belonging to the outlaws' community. Near the center of the ruins was a huge pile of half-calcined bones. It was here that the Cayguas had burned their dead comrades.

"It may be they war-kerried off captyves," said Old Bull's-Eye, slowly. "I reckon we'll hev to foller 'em an' see."

Carmela made no reply, in words, but her actions spoke plainly. Wherever the scout chose to lead, she would follow.

Throughout that long, weary day, the strangely-matched scouts hung upon the rear of the Cayguas, using all possible precaution against discovery, riding along the trampled trail in order to cover their own footprints, which were thus lost

among the multitude. As night fell, Old Bull's-Eye dismounted and covered by the reeds and grass, crept up near enough to reconnoiter the Indian camp. From their preparations he was satisfied that they intended to remain all night at the grove, and returned to where Carmela was waiting with the horses. While eating their scanty meal of cold roast meat, the scout made known his plans. They were simple. He would wait until the Cayguas were sleeping, then would enter the camp and endeavor to find out who were the captives. After that, he would act as circumstances dictated.

The reader is already aware of the result of his bold adventure. He was discovered and narrowly escaped capture. But escape he did, thanks to the courage of Carmela, who had skillfully led the horses, after first muffling their hoofs, up to within fifty yards of the Cayguas' camp. Mounting, they dashed rapidly away, keeping to the beaten trail, the muffled hoofs of their animals leaving little or no signs of their passage. This was how the Indian scouts could discover no trail when morning came.

The two scouts rode back for several miles, dismounting first over the edge of a long prairie-swell, from the crest of which they could command a fair view of the trail clear to the grove of trees, and thus be enabled to easily avoid any pursuit that might be made.

Old Bull's-Eye was strangely subdued. He had told Carmela all that he had seen in the Caygua camp, and she recognized her mother, Chiquita, in the woman who had uttered the scream that aroused the savages.

"You say she's your mother, little one?" he uttered, at length. "What kin you remember of your father?"

"Nothing—it does not seem as though I had ever had one. Years ago, when I used to ask mother about him, she would grow terribly angry, and beat me until I promised never to mention the subject again. At such times I was afraid of her. She looked and acted like an insane woman. And once she cursed both him and I, until I ran away and hid myself in terror."

"Did you ever hear her speak of a man named Walter Dugrand? Try and remember."

"No, I think not. But she and Red Hawk often spoke of one *Antone Barillo*. They taught me to hate that man, and made me swear eternal vengeance against him and his, upon the holy cross. And yet—I don't know—he did not seem like one who could have done any very great crime, and I am sure his daughter, Anita, was pure and true as the very angels above."

"This *Antone Barillo*—who and what was he?"

"He went by the name of *Juan de Sylva*. He had a cattle rancho on the *Arroyo Florez*, and—"

"Did you ever see this before?" quietly asked Old Bull's-Eye.

He held up a diamond-hilted dagger and small bit of paper. Carmela stared, open-eyed. Then she replied:

"Yes—it is mine. You found it at the rancho?"

"I did—in *Juan de Sylva's* chamber. You left it there?"

"Yes. Listen. I will tell you all, since we are friends now and are working for the same end. She who calls herself my mother—"

"Who calls herself—and is she not?" eagerly.

"I don't believe she is"—slowly. "I do not feel toward her as one should toward a mother, nor does she treat me as a mother would. She curses me, at times—until I was strong enough to take my own part, she used to beat me cruelly. And then—my mother could not stoop so low as to be friendly with that ruffian, *Jack Hawk*—"

"What is she to him?"

"I asked that once, and she said they were married," replied Carmela, her face flushing. "But let that pass now. Chiquita sent me to the *Rancho de Sylva*. I was to find out, if possible, if the owner was our man. I went in disguise, and easily gained an entrance. That night, under pretense of telling my business at *Santa Fe*—I said I was on my way to that place—I told them the story Chiquita made me commit to memory. *De Sylva* seemed strangely agitated, and I believed he was indeed *Antone Barillo*. So I carried out the rest of my instructions. I stole into his chamber, when he was asleep. I held a rag saturated with chloroform over his face, and kept him from giving the alarm, though he retained his senses long enough to recognize me. That was what I wished. He would know then that the avenger was upon the trail. I pinned that paper to my dagger, and thrust it to the hilt in—"

"You killed him?" cried Old Bull's-Eye, fiercely.

"No, senor; I struck only the pillow beside his head. Chiquita said that he must die a living death—that he never know whose hand was punishing him. Then I stole out to meet Chiquita and tell her my duty was accomplished. But she had changed her plans. *Red Hawk* had returned unexpectedly, and they had agreed to sack the rancho. They succeeded, as you must know, since you found that dagger. I took charge of *Lady Anita*, and protected her from *Jack Hawk*. She believed that her father was dead—Chiquita led her to his bedside, where he lay cold and quiet, under the influence of the drug. Nor did she know that he was carried along with us, a captive, in a litter like the ones we used to transport our wounded on, for Chiquita kept him drugged all the time. I know that he was in the village when the Indians attacked us, but whether he was killed or carried away captive, you know as well as I, senor."

"If he's alive, I'll find him; if not—well, since this woman whom you say is called Chiquita, hated him so bitterly, she may be able to tell me what I wish to learn. Hal yonder

comes some of the varmints—they're lookin' for the trail o' the one who tricked 'em so 'cutely last night, but I reckon we're smart enough to keep out o' the way," chuckled Old Bull's-Eye, in the tone that seemed more natural to him.

The muffled hoofs had left no print plain enough to decide in which direction the animals had been traveling, and were easily overlooked among such a mass of hoofprints. The Cayguas were baffled, and finally hastened after the main body.

The strangely-matched couple followed, at a safe distance. It was not Old Bull's-Eye's desire to come up with them until they should have gone into camp for the night, as he must rely altogether upon cunning. Yet, despite his skill and caution, he rode blindly into a trap from which escape appeared impossible.

Seven Cayguas had strayed aside from the main trail, down a winding hollow, where they hoped to find a water hole. In returning, they caught sight of Old Bull's-Eye and Carmela, who were just topping the other swell, and hoping to effect a capture, the Indians caused their mustangs to lie down in the tall reeds. Unsuspecting the ambush, Old Bull's-Eye trotted on, following the broad trail passing within two hundred yards of the crouching Indians. When they ran upon the top of the second rise, the Cayguas cautiously advanced, and then, now that the pale-faces were between two fires, charged at top speed, feeling confident that there could be no failure.

The rapid thud of the animals' hoofs was the first intimation Old Bull's-Eye had of danger, and glancing back, he saw the Cayguas just gaining the ridge, advancing at a swift run, brandishing their long spears, looking like very fiends.

"Come on," muttered the scout, between his teeth. "We must meet them on the level—they'd run right over us here."

Snow-squall darted forward like a flash, while the spunky little mustang of Carmela kept close beside him. A yell of wild exultation burst from the Cayguas as they saw the pale-faces racing swiftly on toward the main body. But Old Bull's-Eye smiled grimly. He knew what he was about. He knew the advantage of charging down-hill.

"Now we'll turn on 'em," he said, to Carmela, as a swift backward glance showed him the Cayguas just beginning the long ascent. "You leave 'em to me. Jest watch your critter an' see that he don't stumble."

Carmela made no reply, but her face glowed with enthusiasm and her eyes sparkled and snapped as this man spoke so coolly of charging seven fully-armed foemen. A coward would have become a hero with such a man for a leader.

Snow-squall wheeled as upon a pivot, and then dashed like a thunderbolt upon the astonished Cayguas. Old Bull's-Eye touched not the reins. A cocked revolver filled each hand. A stern fire filled his eyes. He seemed more than human as he charged the foe, sitting his noble steed like a centaur.

Crack—crack went the pistols. Surprised by this sudden and unexpected move, the Cayguas checked their ponies. It was a foolish act, and met its fit meed. The big stallion hurled them aside, knocking over horse and rider as though they had been toys. And before he had time to secure a second aim, Old Bull's-Eye found himself beyond the enemy. But his shrill, taunting laugh was turned to a furious curse of rage as he heard a half-stifled shriek from behind. Carmela no longer rode beside him!

The charge had been so swift that the Cayguas hardly had time to level their lances. But one of them was buried past the flint head in the chest of the mustang ridden by Carmela. Active as a cat, she alighted upon her feet, clear of the wounded animal, but her foot slipped and she fell. One of the Cayguas, who still retained his seat, now leveled his spear and charged at the maiden, who, having no time to arise, flung up her arm and fired. Death-stricken, the savage fell forward, his spear pinning Carmela to the ground, just grazing her side as she lay. It was as the mustang leaped over her, unseating its dying rider, that Carmela uttered the shriek.

Like a human meteor Old Bull's-Eye thundered up the hill, his revolver speaking at every mighty leap made by Snow-squall, but something seemed to have unsteadied his hand, and nearly all of the bullets sped wide.

A lithe Caygua, one of those who had been dismounted, drew his stone hatchet and sprung to where Carmela lay. But the stroke was never delivered. For the second time Carmela fired, and again death claimed its victim.

And the next moment Snow-squall carried his master to the spot. Bending low, the scout grasped Carmela by the arm, and raised her before him by main strength, the long lance-shaft slipping through the hole cut in her tunic.

All this occurred far more rapidly than the details can be read. Four of the Cayguas lay dead or dying. Another lay helpless beneath the body of his crippled mustang. The other two were dismounted, and seemed utterly bewildered.

But from beyond the ridge there came the sound of loud yells, mingled with the rapid trampling of many hoofs. And Old Bull's-Eye knew that other enemies were swiftly approaching. Cumbered as he was with the maiden in his arms he knew that it would be worse than useless to attempt to capture one of the riderless horses that scampered around. The fresh savages would be upon him before he could do this, and besides, the two Cayguas were hastily stringing their bows. There was only one course. He must trust to Snow-squall to carry them both out of peril.

Away down the hill, across the narrow level, up the long slope sped the gray stallion, devouring space with his long, swift stride, carrying his double burden as though only a feather's weight. Old Bull's-Eye felt his heart swell with pride in the possession of this noble animal.

Glancing back at a fresh chorus of yells, he saw nearly a score of Cayguas just crossing the opposite swell, pressing forward in hot pursuit, urging their fiery mustangs on with voice and lasso. And thus the chase swept on. Up hill and down, over the vast prairie swells, keeping to the back trail, where the reeds were trampled down, affording surer footing. Slowly the gray stallion gained upon the more diminutive pursuers, but Old Bull's-Eye wisely refrained from urging him. He knew of what stern stuff the desert-bred ponies were; that they could maintain a steady gallop from sun to sun, without water or rest. Alone, he could easily have ridden away from the Cayguas, possibly could have done so even with the double load, but Snow-squall had not tasted water since early dawn, and he loved the horse too much to exert him unnecessarily. He believed that he could maintain his advantage until dark, when it would be an easy task to give the Cayguas the slip.

On for mile after mile, hour after hour, sped the chase. The speed had lessened. The great exertion was telling upon both pursued and pursuers. Snow-squall was covered with sweat and foam. The sun was scorching hot. The air itself seemed wasted from an oven. It was a stern, killing race.

The sun crept down the west, setting in a dull, reddish haze. Old Bull's-Eye cast continued glances around, his face wearing an anxious expression. The Cayguas, stern as fate, thundered on, not half a mile in his rear. Snow-squall was beginning to labor more heavily. The matted weeds were difficult to break through, too high to be cleared easily at such speed. The chase no longer led in the beaten trail. By following it around the sharp curve, the Cayguas would have gained a great advantage. Old Bull's-Eye kept on in a direct line.

"They are gaining upon us!" murmured Carmela.

"Just now. I am letting poor Snow-squall gain his second wind. It is about time to show these gentry our heels," quietly said the scout.

The Cayguas yelled triumphantly. They believed that Snow-squall was failing at last. Old Bull's-Eye smiled grimly. Then he bent forward and spoke encouragingly to the gray stallion. A sharp whicker, a short toss of the head, and then Snow-squall stretched out in a marvelous burst of speed, considering the long distance he had already covered. The Cayguas were distanced rapidly. In vain they whipped and urged on their ponies. The gray, with its double burden, soon became blended with the shades of night, and then disappeared from their strained gaze. Yet they kept on. One warrior bent low along his mustang's neck, and easily traced the trail where the weeds were crushed and broken.

"He can't stand such a strain long," said Carmela, anxiously.

"Long enough to fool them. But 'tis not that that I am most afraid of now," was the uneasy reply. "Do you notice nothing unusual? Is not your throat sore?"

"Yes—but I am very thirsty—that is the reason."

"If it was—but I fear there's worse behind. Look back—that red light is more than the setting of the sun. *The prairie is on fire!*" slowly replied Old Bull's-Eye.

CHAPTER XV.

A TERRIBLE RIDE.

The prairie is on fire!

How much is contained in that brief sentence! The cry of fire at sea is scarcely more terrible.

The lurid glow against the western horizon was rising higher and spreading upon both sides. The air was more densely laden with smoke, acrid and pungent.

"Can't we fight fire with fire?" asked Carmela, eagerly.

"Listen," replied Old Bull's-Eye, momentarily checking Snow-squall. "You hear that sound? Those cursed Cayguas are still following at our heels. If we were to stop and kindle a fire, they would be upon us in a minute. No, that would be sure death—our only chance is to keep on and try to make cover before the fire can reach us. If poor Snow-squall was only fresh—"

"Is there any cover near, sufficient to check the fire?"

"I can't tell, little one. This is a new part of the country to me. We are going it blind, just now. All we can do is to hope for the best," said Old Bull's-Eye, as he spoke encouragingly to the gray stallion, who again resumed his head-long flight.

Night had fairly settled over the earth. The stars shone dimly, as through a hazy veil, yet emitting light enough to enable Old Bull's-Eye to distinguish the Cayguas, as they crossed a swell not half a mile to the rear. He saw that, though riding nearly abreast, the savages were spread out upon either hand, as though to guard against the fugitives doubling. Though they must have discovered the peril that was swiftly following them, the desert warriors had evidently resolved not to be balked in their revenge.

Scowling darkly, Old Bull's-Eye veered abruptly to the right hand, just after crossing the swell, and dashed swiftly down the long slope, diagonally, hoping by this move to deceive the Indians long enough to allow him to start a fire in their rear. But this hope was foiled. A warning yell from one of the flank riders, and the Cayguas pressed hotly after their victims.

Uneasily Old Bull's-Eye peered ahead. But he could dis-

tinguished no signs of cover. As far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but a dreary waste of weeds. The prairie swells, too, were growing less high and further separated. And before another mile was run, they disappeared altogether. The prairie was level as a barn floor as far as the aching eye could reach.

It was a curious situation: The doubly-burdened Snow-squall flying along with indomitable energy. Behind them, distinctly visible by the dull, yet lurid light that seemed to be reflected from the heavens, urging on their jaded ponies with whip and rawhide lasso, thundered the relentless Cayguas. In their rear, far away, running the dark limit of the vast prairie, were thousands upon thousands of wild animals, rushing blindly along in a mad stampede. And still further to the rear, came the terrible prairie fire.

For full an hour this strange race was continued, Snow-squall nobly maintaining his lead of the Cayguas. But Old Bull's-Eye knew that it could not last long. There was a limit even to his marvelous endurance. And then—death in three different shapes was threatening.

The distant and muffled sound from the rear gradually increased in volume, until the earth fairly trembled beneath the feet of the fugitives. The atmosphere grew more oppressive and heavy. The lurid glow deepened. A backward glance revealed the line of flame that seemed consuming the horizon.

A strong puff of wind carried a new sound to the ears of the two pale-faces; a distant bellowing—the combined voices of countless animals maddened by terror.

"There is only one hope for us," said Old Bull's-Eye, "and that is a slim one. Are you willing to try it?"

"Do whatever you think best. I have all confidence in you," was the earnest reply; and Carmela did not turn aside her face as the old man bowed his head and pressed his lips to hers.

"Hold fast to me, then. I must have both hands free."

Until now he had held Carmela before him, just as he had snatched her up from the ground. Checking Snow-squall, he swung the maiden around behind him, where she was soon firmly seated, clinging to his belt. While thus occupied, the Cayguas were rapidly advancing, yelling triumphantly, believing that some accident had occurred, through which they would yet secure the coveted scalps in time to avoid the threatening peril behind.

Drawing his revolvers, Old Bull's-Eye urged Snow-squall directly toward the Cayguas, yelling loudly, opening fire the instant he was within range. The savages were taken by surprise, and though they plied their bows and arrows, it was with anything but a certain aim. Two of their number fell, dead or disabled, and then the gray stallion dashed past them, before they could collect their scattered line into anything like a compact body.

As yet untouched by the arrows, Old Bull's-Eye dashed on, directly toward the thundering mass of animals, as though intent upon committing suicide. For a hundred yards the Cayguas followed, plying their bows swiftly, but then their nerve failed, and they wheeled to resume their flight. Even with the start they now had, they doubted whether their jaded ponies could hold their own with the stampeding animals behind, until secure cover was reached—a dense grove of trees or some obstacle sufficient to turn aside the fleeing mass.

Almost immediately Snow-squall was following them. Old Bull's-Eye replaced his revolvers and prepared for the next act. He tore off his woolen tunic and then cut a large piece from his under-shirt of cotton cloth. Doubling this, and pressing it into the hollow of his hand, he poured a lot of powder into the cup-like hollow, adding to this a little whisky from the leathern flask that hung at his saddle-bow. Handing this to Carmela, he produced a piece of tinder.

While thus occupied, the fleetest game of all kinds were passing them. Deer, wolves and an occasional jaguar, bounded past them, in company, thinking only of escape from the double death behind. Here an antelope was beside a huge elk; a wild mustang kept close company with a huge buffalo bull. Further in the rear came a countless herd of buffalo, their terrified bellowings sounding louder and louder, mingled with terrific howls and shrill screams, while the beating of their hoofs sounded like distant thunder, causing the very earth to quake and tremble.

Old Bull's-Eye flashed a charge of powder over the tinder, and soon had it glowing brightly, then he snatched the prepared rag from Carmela, and checked Snow-squall.

"Hold him firm—if he runs away now, you are doomed!" he shouted, to Carmela.

Her reply was drowned by the thunder of the oncoming herd. Old Bull's-Eye ignited the tinder and rag, swinging them swiftly around his head. A little explosion—a sharp, fizzing sound, and then he cast the glowing bundle to the ground, piling weeds and grass upon it. A column of flame shot up, blazing freely. Then, caught by the wind, the fire spread rapidly. But would it be sufficient to turn the terrified mass of animals?

Old Bull's-Eye shouted and screamed until it seemed as though he would split his throat, emptying his rifle and pistols in rapid succession full in the faces of the oncoming herd. But the surging mass, bellowing, roaring, swept on with the relentless force of a mighty hurricane; buffaloes, wild horses and elks all mixed together, forming an immense array, miles in length, miles in depth. On they came, until glaring eyeballs could be distinguished by the two beings who still firmly held their ground, knowing how hopeless any attempt at flight would be.

On they came, the foremost giving vent to loud bellows of

terror as they neared the rapidly spreading flame, but unwilling or unable to turn aside. Death seemed inevitable—a horrible doom—to be beaten down and trampled to death beneath those countless thousands of hoofs.

Carmela uttered a scream of horror, and covered her eyes with her hands. At that moment came a loud report, and a dazzling blue flame shot up high into the air. Snow-squall snorted loudly, and would have fled, had not the strong hands of Old Bull's-Eye grasped the bridle.

"Hurrah!" he shouted, shrilly. "We're saved—we're saved little one! Give me your pistols, and we're all right."

Carmela could scarce believe her eyes, as she glanced up. The immense herd had divided, and was now thundering along upon each hand. The fire still burned with a vivid bluish flame. By a happy thought, Old Bull's-Eye had flung his leathern flask of whisky upon the fire. It had exploded, sending a blinding column of flame high into the air. Terrified, the animals swerved to each side, throwing down and trampling over hundreds of their fellows. And now the two scouts were in the very midst of the drove, with less than twenty yards of clear space on either side.

To keep this space, was now Old Bull's-Eye's only thought, for were the animals to close up, naught could save them. Taking Carmela's pistols, bidding her reload his weapons, with all haste, he opened fire upon the animals. The reports were deadened by the thundering of hoofs, but the sharp flashes did their duty well.

The fire started by Old Bull's-Eye had been trampled out by the millions of hoofs, save just at Snow-squall's feet, which the hunter managed to keep blazing by casting weeds upon it during the intervals of firing.

And thus for nearly an hour—a lifetime of terrible suspense—they stood comparatively helpless, surrounded by death. Nor was it alone the trampling, thundering hoofs that they had to fear. With every moment the heat was increasing—the sea of fire rolling nearer. The roaring and crackling of the flames could already be distinguished, even above the horrible tumult—above the wild bellowing, the agonized screams of the helpless animals that, exhausted, sunk down to be licked up by the devouring flames, leaving, perhaps, a few calcined bones to mark the spot.

The heat was terrible—like the fiery breath of some huge furnace. Their brains throbbed as though they would burst. Their garments shriveled and charred. Their hair crisped and curled, their skin seemed to blister.

But then the mass of animals grew perceptibly thinner, and Old Bull's-Eye, though knowing there was great danger of being crushed by the mad brutes, mounted Snow-squall and dashed along with the crowd. The gray stallion had recovered his wind, in a measure, and urged on by terror, could easily have outstripped the rearmost animals, only for the dense mass in front. And then followed another terrible ride.

It was a maddening scene. Before, behind, upon every side were thousands upon thousands of animals straining every muscle in the endeavor to escape the relentless fire-fiend that pressed them close. With every instant some of the lot gave out and sunk to the ground, screaming, bellowing, snarling and wailing in excess of terror—ceasing only when swallowed up by the rolling mass of flames. 'Twas a picture that defies the pen, that utterly beggars description.

On, on, for what seemed a lifetime, the routing herd in front, the fire behind—and the distance between growing momentarily less. Oh! for a clear field—for a chance to test brave Snow-squall's power—and not be thus penned up, obliged to measure their speed by that of the clumsy brutes wedged so closely together. To the over-wrought imagination of the riders, the gray stallion was forced to creep. And the fire crept nearer and nearer, until its fiery fingers seemed to dart out and quiver exultingly above the heads of the fugitives.

The riders were nearly insensible, from combined heat and suffocation. They heard not—or if it smote their ears, was unheeded—a peculiar sound from in front—a dull, rearing sound that shook the earth. And then, with a wild snort Snow-squall fell.

A shrill, piercing shriek—then all was dark.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RED HAWK'S LAST FLIGHT.

"CURSES on these careless dogs! The moment my back is turned, they let all precaution go to the devil. No look-out—no guard! What is there to prevent any one from entering, just as we are doing now? Nothing at all!"

Big Jack Hawk wound up, as he had begun his speech, with an angry oath, little suspecting the reason why he found the pass unguarded—why the voice of the look-out did not pass along the word that a body of horsemen was approaching.

Red Hawk had accompanied the Kiowa chief, Opishko Koaki, until the more difficult portion of the journey was over, and the captured stock so accustomed to the trail that the savages would find little difficulty in keeping them together and going in the right direction. Then, after making arrangements with the chief as to where they were to meet next, he headed for the Hawks' Nest, eager to again behold the fair Anita, whose charms had set his sensual nature afire. Besides this, he was anxious to conclude arrangements and start upon the grand raid that would make his very name a

wonder and marvel throughout the South-west. Little did he dream of what had occurred during his absence, else his fierce curses would have been more subdued, or leveled at the desert warriors.

The discovery came soon enough. The mouth of the pass was reached; but instead of the peaceful, cozy little village nestling there in the shadow of the evergreen hills, a scene of bleak and staring desolation greeted his astounded gaze. Little piles of ashes. Gaunt wolves and ragged vultures and buzzards snarled and fought over the scattered bones that, clean picked and polished, afforded not even a mouthful of gristle to stay their raging hunger.

It was a terrible shock. Even those outlaws, thieves and murderers had hearts that could love. Many of them had left wife and children here, when they took up the trail. And now—where were they? Ah! yonder scattered bones, dismembered, scarred by the strong wolf-teeth, told but too plainly the dread truth.

The first shock over, the men leaped from their saddles and ran here and there, shouting the names of their beloved ones, hoping against hope that they might have fled to the densely-wooded hills and there escaped the death that befell the others. But only the echo replied—that and the lugubrious howlings of the half-famished wolves, the sullen flapping of wings or an occasional harsh croak as the winged scavengers hovered above the basin, loth to abandon the scene that had furnished them such a glorious feast.

Several of the Red Hawks, who had not left a wife or children in the doomed village, were quietly searching for some clue to the mystery—and they soon succeeded. One of them approached Jack Hawk, who sat his horse like one dazed, and silently held up a bow and several arrows.

"You see who did it now, cap'n," the veteran said, slowly.

Red Hawk started, then seized the weapons and carefully examined them. The arrows were flint-headed, short and stout. Just below the head were three circular stripes or bands, half an inch wide; the center one blood-red, the outer ones black. The bow was a curious piece of work, heavy and cumbersome. To form it, hundreds of pieces of buffalo-horn had been used, the thin layers so ingeniously fitted together, so firmly bound with wire-like sinews, that scarce a joint could be detected, the whole forming a weapon over a yard in length, so strong and stubborn that it seemed impossible for mortal arm to bend it. Red Hawk recognized the work.

"The Man-eaters—the Cayguas!" he exclaimed.

"Them dirty varmints, fer a fact, Cap'n Jack. An' now you kin guess why so many o' these bones hev bin burnt."

"You think—"

"I know, boss. The hounds roasted an' ett the karkidges of our toaks. Ef they tuck any captyves, they'll roast 'em, too, as soon as they git back to thar town," grated the old man.

"Not if we can help it! Hol there—scatter and hunt for the trail! We'll have pay for this work if we have to follow the red devils clear to their desert home!" cried Red Hawk, now fully aroused, and he himself led the way back through the pass and beyond the tract of shingle to where a trail could first be picked up.

There was little difficulty in finding it, where over two hundred horses had passed along. And then the Red Hawks flew swiftly along the broad trail, stern and determined.

It is unnecessary to follow them, mile by mile. The trail was more than one day old, by several hours, but the Red Hawks passed over the ground far more rapidly than the Cayguas had, for, be it remembered, the cannibals had obliged their captives to walk, while on their first day's retreat. Thus, it lacked over an hour to sunset, when the Red Hawks neared the first night's camp of the cannibals—the one where the Kiowa brave was sacrificed to their war-god.

The reader may think it strange that the outlaws did not take more precaution—why they did not send forth a scout to

examine the timber *motte* before the main body advanced. And yet, why should they? The trail was full twenty-four hours old. The Cayguas were making all haste toward their desert home, and would not loiter by the way for fear of pursuit. In that wild, lone portion of the country, one might ride for days and even weeks without meeting a living human much less a party strong enough to give them trouble—numbering, as they did, full three-score stout, thoroughly-armed men. There seemed to be no danger. The *motte* appeared utterly devoid of human life. And so the Red Hawk galloped blindly on to their death!

Red Jack Hawk was riding in front, and his keen eye detected something suspicious, when scarce twenty yards from the timber. Something bright and glittering, like the flash of polished steel in the rays of the setting sun. Trained in a rough school, where the quickest eye and surest hand generally gained the victory, his action was prompt now, and undoubtedly saved his life. Quick as thought he prostrated himself along the neck of his mustang, uttering a cry of warning to his men.

But the cry was never heard. It was drowned by a loud crash—fifty rifles exploded at the same moment, hurling their death-hail full in the faces of the astounded outlaws, nearly half of whom went down before the withering volley, dead or dying. And then came another volley, followed by wild, ringing cheers as the smoke-wilted foliage parts and scores of roughly-clad figures spur their horses out from the cover.

What a terrible change had these two seconds wrought! The body of Red Hawks trotting along, full of life and animal spirits, and now—! The prairie covered with dead and dying, with men and horses, writhing, groaning, screaming

in agony. Of the strong band, not one-fifth were alive and unhurt, and these, cowed by the frightful slaughter of their comrades, turned to seek safety in flight, urging their tired horses on with voice and spur.

"After them—don't let one escape!" thundered a tall, athletic man, bestriding a clean-limbed States' horse, as he charged over the mass of bleeding, writhing bodies. "You, Murph. Toole and Tampkin, take one of the hounds alive!"

With these words, the leader of the Man-hunters—for the reader will recognize Walter Dugrand in the speaker—dashed after a swiftly-fleeing fugitive, from whom his gaze had never been removed since a few words uttered in his ear by Murph. Toole, just before the first volley. And, hearing the rapid thundering close in his rear, Red Hawk glanced over his shoulder at his pursuer. A startling change came over his florid face—now turned to a sickly sallow tinge—his eyes protruding from their sockets, his teeth chattering together like one suffering from the ague.

Dugrand drew a revolver and leveled it. The report came sharp and clear, and the outlaw and his horse went down in a heap. Dugrand drew rein, and cried:

"Get up, Jack Hawk. I am glad to see you, at last, after nearly twenty years of steady trailing. Up, man—up, I say, or I'll kill you as you lay, without giving you time to utter a single prayer."

"I can't—I'm crippled—my leg is broken," groaned the Red Hawk, as he rolled painfully aside to avoid the dying struggles of his mustang.

"I shot the horse, not you," muttered Dugrand. Nevertheless he dismounted and approached the outlaw, keeping on his guard against a sudden shot or knife-thrust, and his first move was to completely disarm the Red Hawk.

"What are you going to do with me?" the wretch whispered, hoarsely, all his bravado gone, his brute courage fled.

"You may well ask that, Red Hawk. For twenty years, almost, I have hunted you—you know what cause I had. It's a heavy—a black score you've got to settle, Jack Hawk. I don't think there'll be much left of you when it's balanced."

"You won't murder me—a crippled man?"

"Murder—and you?" laughed Dugrand, sneeringly. "Bah! you sicken me. I thought you had the courage of a wolf, at least, but you are a miserable, cowardly cur—dog you have lived, and a dog you shall die!"

"We've got one o' the varmints alive, as you said, boss," quoth Murph. Toole, riding up at this moment.

"It don't much matter, since I've got my man, here. Lend a hand, Toole, and we'll carry him to the timber. We'll stop there to-night," tersely said Dugrand.

Between them they lifted the Red Hawk, whose left leg had really been shattered by the fall from his horse, and with a good deal of groaning upon his part, finally reached the spring in the *motte*. Here he was deposited beside the bound form of the other captive, Dick Croghan, the old plainsman, who had first solved the mystery of the destroyed village, by finding the weapons dropped by the Cayguas. Besides these two, not half a dozen of the Red Hawks had escaped the deadly ambush, and they only by sufferance. For once the Man-hunters were surfeited with blood.

A fire was built beside the spring. Walter Dugrand turned Red Hawk around and propped him up so that the light shone full upon his face. Then, squatting down beside him, the avenger uttered, in a low, even tone:

"I'm going to tell you a little story, Red Hawk, and you will set me right if I make any mistake. Only be careful what you say. You are upon trial for your life, now."

"Twenty-three years ago, we both lived in Louisiana. I had just come into my property—one of the richest in the whole State. You were a gentleman of leisure—or, to speak plainer, a gambler, a sharper, who lived by his wits. You sought my acquaintance, and through your toadying and fawning, gained my confidence. You initiated me into the mysteries of draw-poker, and made a pretty good thing of it. But you grew reckless, and, one evening, at the club-house, I detected you cheating; from that day you were a marked man—not even the niggers would speak to you, willingly."

"Well, I sowed my wild oats, and married. For two years I was happy, for my wife loved me, and I fairly idolized her and our baby daughter. Then, nineteen years ago, business called me to New Orleans. When I returned my wife and child were gone, the slaves knew not where. They could only tell me that a white man came to the house, hurriedly, and said he bore important news for my wife. She saw him—threw on her wraps, and, taking the baby, got into the carriage and departed, without leaving word where she was going, or what had called her away."

"I took up the trail, and though I often lost it for weeks and even months at a time, I finally traced them to Nacogdoches. The party then consisted of a big red-haired man, whose description agreed with what you were then, a smaller man, with only one eye, and my wife and child. I lost the trail. You had vanished, no one could tell where. From that day to this I have hunted you. Six months since I struck the right trail, and became convinced that the notorious Red Hawk was my man. I raised a party of true men—the same who have just wiped out your entire band—and here I am."

"Now, Jack Hawk, what have you to say? Tell me the truth, or by all the fiends of Hades, I will put you to the torture—I will make you suffer ten thousand deaths in one, and end by roasting you alive! Speak!"

"What do you want me to say?" whined the cowed outlaw.

"Where is my wife and child? Tell me that, first—in one word—are they still living?"

"Yes, they are—or were when I saw them last."

"How long since? Be careful what you say—if you attempt to deceive me now—?"

"Three days ago. I'll tell you the truth. You've got me in a corner, a—lying 'll do no good," sullenly muttered Hawk.

"Go on, then—tell me the whole story, from the first," added Dugrand, calming his agitation by a powerful effort.

"How came my wife to leave her home to go with you?"

"She thought she was going to you. I sent her a message, saying that you had been severely wounded in a duel—that you were not expected to live, and wished to see her before you died—"

"Ha! you dog!" snarled Dugrand, clutching the outlaw by the throat, and shaking him as a cat does a rat.

"Better let him tell his story fust, cap'n," coolly said Toole.

"You're right—I forgot myself. Go on, Jack Hawk," said Dugrand, releasing the almost suffocated wretch.

"I'll see you cursed first!" gasped Red Hawk, as he recovered his breath. "You mean to murder me, anyway, and I'll go under with a close mouth. You'll learn nothing more from me!"

Dugrand made no reply in words, but caught up a blazing brand and pressed it against the outlaw's breast, who in vain sought to writhe away, yelling and cursing with pain.

"Mercy—for love of God! mercy!" he shrieked, in agony.

"Go on, then. Tell me every thing," sternly ordered Dugrand.

The wretch, as soon as he could control his voice, obeyed. He knew that the stern avenger would show him no mercy in the end, but, coward-like, he wished to protract the fatal moment as long as possible, and so strung out his confession to a length that would sorely task the patience of the reader, were it all recorded here. A synopsis must suffice.

Mrs. Dugrand fell into the trap, and, with her baby daughter, entered the carriage waiting. They crossed the river, and that night were joined by Jack Hawk, who undelivered his victim. And what could she do? Nothing. He carried her to Texas, abandoning the carriage and riding horseback. At Nacogdoches, knowing that she was entirely at his mercy, and unable to fight his strong passions any longer, she consented to a ceremony that, though of course it was not legal, since her husband was living, in a manner soothed her conscience, and a priest pronounced them man and wife. Hawk left the place suddenly, learning that Dugrand was upon his trail, doubled upon his tracks and returned to the States, where he lived for years, making a living by the cards and still more disreputable means. Then, three years ago, he found himself again in Texas, formed a band of outlaws, and soon made his name known far and wide.

"Where are they now?" demanded Dugrand, impatiently.

"In the hands of the Cayguas—a tribe of cannibals. They burned my town, but I found the footprints of Chiquita and Carmela among those of the captives. We were on the trail, to rescue them, when you attacked us."

"You mean that this Chiquita, as you call her, and Carmela, are my wife and child?"

"Yes, they are. That is, if they are alive now," and Red Hawk could not entirely hide a look of devilish exultation, for he believed that he would be avenged, even in death.

"If you'll trust me, boss," said Dick Croghan, "I'll take you to the hidin'-place o' these cannibals, es you call 'em. I know the trail like a book, 'cause I war—"

"Wait—I'll talk with you after a while. Now, Jack Hawk," said Dugrand, turning to the crippled outlaw, "of course you know what to expect. I've sworn to kill you, and I mean to keep my word. I did intend to torture you as horribly as I could, but that would only degrade me to your own level. I will kill you easily. You have just ten minutes more of life. Make the most of it. Pray, if you can, for mercy hereafter."

The craven wretch begged and pleaded for mercy—that he was not fit to die. Dugrand crouched before him, watch in hand, counting off the seconds, while he held a revolver muzzle against the outlaw's temple. The firelight flickered fretfully, casting weird, fantastic shadows around. The Man-hunters stood in a circle, watching for the end with bated breath. Dugrand closed his watch.

"Mercy—spare me, for the love of—"

The revolver exploded—Red Hawk fell forward upon his face dead.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE SLAUGHTER-PEN.

SHKOTE-NAH, the giant chief of the Cayguas, discovered that the prairie was on fire long before Old Bull's-Eye and Carmela, as their pursuers suspected the cause of the peculiar density of the atmosphere. He called a halt and held a hurried consultation with several of his oldest braves, the result of which was an abrupt change in their course. Veering to the left, they rode on at a gallop, the captives placed in the center and forced forward with the rest. The Cayguas were sternly silent. A vague dread possessed the captives. They knew that some danger was threatening, but could only surmise its nature, or, if any one was wiser, he could not make known the truth, for the rapid trampling of near a thousand

hoofs upon the hard, dry prairie would have drowned his voice most effectually.

On, on! The air grew denser, more heavily laden with pungent, acrid smoke and feathery black cinders. And far away toward the setting sun, a dull reddish glow began to grow and spread, marking the swift progress of the prairie scourge.

Then came a long, shrill yell from one of the leading braves, and the anxious expression that had previously deepened upon the faces of the Cayguas, gave place to one of great satisfaction. Let the fire-fiend do its worst, now, it could not injure them. The object of their mad race almost directly toward the fire, was now made apparent. Before them yawned a wide, deep barranca. For this the Cayguas had headed, crossing near twenty miles of trackless waste, yet not deviating one hundred yards from a direct line.

This barranca—which might almost be called a *crevasse*—was a peculiar one, since, unlike the majority, it could not have been formed by the action of water. Its width was nearly one hundred yards. Its depth, full forty yards. These dimensions would answer pretty nearly for any portion of the barranca.

The sides sloped abruptly down to the bottom, which was some twenty yards wide, level and smooth, formed of a bed of rock. In rainy weather this huge trough was partially filled with water, but now the rocky sides and bottom were dry as chalk.

This was the refuge so eagerly sought by the Cayguas, the only spot within half a day's ride where they could bid defiance to the prairie fire. And yet a descent into the barranca appeared impracticable without abandoning the horses to their fate. Many a steady-nerved man would have thought twice before attempting the descent on foot.

At a motion from Shkote-nah, a Caygua urged his mustang to the escarpment; but the pony balked, snorting suspiciously. A brave thrust his lance-point into his hips, and with a sharp whicker the brute plunged forward. Squatting flat upon his haunches, with fore-feet extended, the pony slid rapidly down the winding trail, turning the sharp corners as by instinct, the Caygua lying flat along its hips, untouched the bridle, or rather halter. The feat was accomplished without other injury than a few patches of skin from off the mustang's hind-quarters.

In rapid succession this performance was imitated, and half an hour later the entire party were at the bottom of the barranca. Only one serious accident occurred. One of the captives, a white man, lost his presence of mind, and lifting his head, sought to guide his animal by the halter. Its balance destroyed, the mustang struck its fore-feet against a point of rock and was hurled forward, heels over head, turning over and over until reaching the rocky bottom, when it fell upon and crushed its unskillful rider to a jelly, breaking its own neck.

The giant chief carried Anita down, and performed the feat in safety. But the greatest danger was when the extra animals, terrified by the fire beyond, began the descent, plunging rapidly after each other, alighting in a confused, sprawling heap at the foot of the slide. Fortunately there was room enough for the Cayguas and captives to escape the living avalanche, else a grand tragedy would have been the result, instead of only a few crippled horses.

During this scene of confusion, Anita managed to slip away and join her brother and Perry Abbot, and, being still unbound, was embraced by first one, then the other. It was their first actual greeting, for the jealous watchfulness of Shkote-nah had prevented more than the interchange of glances, but now he was otherwise occupied.

There was much to talk about, and brother and sister mingled their tears as they thought of their father and his horrible end—for Anita still believed that he had been murdered and burned in the rancho. Then they were interrupted. The giant chief removed Anita to one side.

The air was growing more and more offensive, even at the bottom of the barranca. The red light above increased, and cinders fell in soft, feathery clouds. But it was not this that caused the uneasy looks of the Cayguas.

A dull, heavy rumbling, at first distant and indistinct, had gradually increased in volume until now it sounded like the warning mutterings of thunder that heralds a violent storm. And the sides of the barranca seemed to shake. Particles of earth were dislodged, and rolled pattering down to the bottom.

And then a shrill, whistling sound from above drew the eyes of all in that direction. The front and wide-spread antlers of a magnificent elk were outlined against the lurid sky. For one moment the animal stood there; then, as if driven frantic with fear, his lithe form stretched out in one magnificent leap, and then—a dull, heavy thud! Shooting through the air like a meteor, the elk was crushed into a shapeless mass against the rocks that lined the base of the opposite side.

Perry and Luis exchanged glances. This, then, was the solution of the rumbling—a stampede of thousands of wild animals! The fire might spare them, but would the maddened animals be equally merciful?

As if in answer to the unuttered question, a wild horse plunged blindly down the barranca, amidst the warning yells of the Cayguas, and before the space could be cleared, a Caygua and his horse were crushed beneath the falling body. And then, in swift succession, came two wolves, an antelope and a jaguar, scattering the savages in every direction. The jaguar alighted close before Shkote-nah and Anita.

The giant chief drew his heavy hatchet and pushed the

maiden behind him, boldly facing the maddened brute, that, snarling and gnashing its long white teeth, seemed about to leap upon the Caygua, though, in truth it was so confused and bewildered by its sudden fall that there was little danger to be feared from it, at least just at present!

But the chief did not reason thus. Having been familiar with the habits of the ferocious brute from boyhood, he did not wait for it to recover, but attacked it boldly. The heavy flint hatchet crushed the animal's skull at the first stroke, yet, such was the brute's tenacity of life that it leaped up and grappled with the Caygua, bringing him to the ground, when they rolled over and over, locked in a death-grapple. A score of braves rushed to the chief's assistance, but it was not needed. Shkote-nah arose with a little cry of victory, bleeding from a score of wounds, yet not seriously injured.

He glanced around for his captive, but Anita was not to be seen. It was no time then to seek for her. He was forced to look out for his own life. The *living avalanche* was now upon them in earnest, not in singles nor in pairs, but in dozens, hundreds—a constant stream of yelling, bellowing, snorting animals, rushing blindly upon their own death in the mad endeavor to escape that which roared and crackled so fiercely behind them.

Neighing, screaming with terror, the mustangs plunged here and there, leaping up the rocky sides only to slip and roll back again, to be stricken down by the maddened animals, as they leaped on and crowded over the escarpment. The Cayguas leaped from their animals, and sought shelter where they might find it, scaling the precipitous rocks to gain some sheltered niche or hole. But many a warrior was torn from his perch, and dashed down to death by some falling animal. 'Twas a horrible scene—one that, fortunately, is rarely paralleled. The barranca was converted into a veritable slaughter-pen, where man and beast died together, killed by the same blow. The yells of terror—the shrieks and groans of agony—the mad howling, the hoarse bellowing, the piercing screams of the falling animals—the constant succession of heavy *thuds*—ah, what pen can picture such a scene? assuredly not mine.

It was fortunate that the main body of the terrified animals did not strike the barranca, else the ravine would have been entirely filled with the bodies, dead or crippled. As it was the bottom was covered full twenty feet deep with the mangled, shapeless carcasses, before the living avalanche ceased.

But the end was not yet. The surviving savages could scarcely realize that the herd had passed, before they were threatened with another peril. The air suddenly grew almost unbearably, not only because of the intense heat, but from the showers of glowing sparks, that fell upon every side, scorching wherever they touched the naked skin. Masses of blazing grass, long, curling weeds, whose stalks, filled with gas, would explode with a sharp report, scattering the red-hot coals in every direction, were hurled before the sea of fire, whose loud roaring, mingled with long, reverberating echoes that sounded like the discharge of thousands of muskets.

Gasping, panting for breath, almost suffocated, those who had scrambled highest up the rocks in order to escape the falling animals, now endeavored to seek lower coverts, but more than one succumbed to the frightful heat, and fainting, only awoke in another world.

Nearer, still nearer, until the fiery tongues start out over the quivering mass of dead and dying, darting here and there, licking around the blood-stained rocks, spending their force against the living bodies, filling the ravine with a sickening smell of wasting flesh and burnt hair, and the monster wall of fire leaps and plays upon the very verge of the barranca, launching out its tongues, in the vain endeavor to leap across the wide barrier and clutch in its writhing embrace the quivering weeds and grass beyond, and then, for want of fresh fuel, the wave subsided, but not until the grass upon the opposite side had ignited from the blazing stalks carried across by the wind.

It was fully an hour before any human being stirred, in that vast slaughter-pen, so overcome were even the strongest by the baptism of fire. The air was even yet like an oven. The rocks were still scorching hot. But then, one by one the surviving Cayguas ventured out of their holes, each one believing himself to be the sole survivor, until he heard his feeble call answered. They gathered together—a woful remnant of the proud, powerful band that had attacked the Hawks' Nest. Less than a score in all, weak and trembling; Shkote-nah turned aside his head, and quivered like a leaf as he saw this.

But then his wonted stoicism returned. He bade his braves go search every nook and cranny among the rocks, setting the example himself. Several braves were found still living, but too weak to answer the signals. The chief uttered a little cry of delight as he caught a glimpse of a white face through a crevice, and tore aside the rocks that had rolled down and blocked the entrance; but his look of eager anticipation changed as he noted the long gray hair. It was Chiquita, not Anita, the golden-haired.

Faint and breathless from his exertions, he sunk back, the dry, cracked tongue lolling from his mouth. Even his iron frame could endure no more. Without water, they must die!

Was it in answer to this mute appeal that the heavy clouds parted and poured a torrent of rain over the glowing rocks, the scorched and blackened prairies? The savages believed so, and the thought gave them courage, as they eagerly lapped up the pools that settled in every hollow. They did not know that this was the natural result of such a tremendous fire.

Thus refreshed they renewed their search. Several more

Cayguas were found, also two of the Red Hawks. Chiquita was revived by the rain, and, owing to the nature of her covert, had escaped with but a few bruises. The fire had not reached her, though the intense heat had caused her to faint.

In vain Shkote-nah hunted for Anita. She had vanished. But where? Had she been stricken down by the falling animals? It must have been so, else she would have been found, for the chief did not relinquish the hope of regaining the fair captive whom he had destined to be his squaw until he had thoroughly examined every yard of the barranca to which she could possibly have fled during the brief interval between his attacking the jaguar and the time when he first missed her.

But his search was fruitless, and he gave the signal to depart. The Cayguas scaled the rocks and gained the prairie, which though blackened and dreary, was rendered cool by the rain. And, with Chiquita, they started for their home, the cannibal stronghold.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BURIED ALIVE.

ANITA DE SILVA uttered a little shriek of terror as the maddened beast crouched before her, its eyes ablaze, its long fangs visible through its parted lips, and when Shkote-nah, the Caygua chief, pushed her back, she turned to flee, running fairly into the arms of Perry Abbot, who had sprung to her rescue. Leaving the giant to cope with the jaguar as best he might, Abbot raised Anita in his arms and clambered rapidly up the rocks, calling upon Luis to follow them. He now fully comprehended the double peril that threatened them, and sought refuge in a hollow between two upright rocks, with a roof of solid earth above. This hole was considerably larger than had seemed from the ledge below, and Luis found no difficulty in following the lovers. And then—the living avalanche thundered down the rocky sides of the barranca. The trio huddled close together, as though for mutual protection.

A livid light filled the barranca without. They could catch glimpses of dark bodies falling swiftly past the entrance—but then all was dark. There came a sudden shock—the sides of the den seemed to be falling in upon and crushing them. With a low moan, Anita swooned. Luis, who was nearest the entrance, groped forward, but only for a few feet. Then he paused, with a cry that sounded in Abbot's ears like a death-knell. He easily understood its meaning.

They were buried alive!

Truly the situation was anything but an enviable one. And yet how much worse it might have been. Here at least they could not be crushed to death by the falling beasts, nor were they so fully exposed to the power of the fire. True, the air was close, and appeared scant, but if they were to be smothered to death, they would die together, locked in each other's arms. And with this thought, Perry bowed his head until his lips touched Anita's.

"There's magic in a kiss"—so sings the poet, and truer words were never spoken.

The pressure was returned, and Anita's arms tightened around the young man's neck. For a moment Abbot was in heaven—'twas the first kiss that had ever passed between them.

But not even love is a specific against suffering, and the young couple were disagreeably reminded of their perilous situation. Breathing became more and more difficult. The earth surrounding them seemed glowing with heat. Perspiration streamed from every pore. Each breath drawn was one of absolute agony. And then—all was a blank.

They had yielded to the terrible strain—they had swooned.

How long this lasted, they never knew. Luis was the first to recover his senses. All was intensely dark—"a gloom that could be seen and felt." The air was close and hot, and every breath seemed like inhaling some noxious liquid. He endeavored to shout, but his voice was like that of a strangling person. Then he groped forward, and shaking Perry, succeeded in arousing him and Anita, who lay tight clasped in each other's arms.

"Rouse up, man!" hoarsely muttered de Sylva. "We are buried alive—the air is almost exhausted—unless we can dig through, we are doomed!"

Abbot seemed confused and bewildered, but then his brain cleared and he remembered all that had occurred.

"To work, then—for her sake!" he gasped, as he crept forward and tore at the hard, dry earth with his naked hands. "But—which is the right direction?"

Which, indeed! Who could answer? But to give way to despair meant certain death. They must have fresh air or die. And with this thought uppermost, yet breathing silent prayers that their efforts might be directed aright, the two men tore down the dirt before them, trampling it under foot unheeding the sharp stones that lacerated their fingers. They were working for life.

The air seemed to grow thicker and more foul, until they could scarcely breathe. They seemed to be sweating blood at every pore. Yet they never paused—a moment lost might be a life.

There was no sound from Anita now. She did not reply when they called to her. Abbot groaned bitterly, but did not quit his work, though he pictured her dying—dying, and he unable to aid her. Oh! it was horrible!

A faint, gasping cry from Luis—but not one of joy. A

sound of utter despair, a sound that told he had lost all hope.

"God help us! *I've struck the solid rock!*" he gasped, and then dropped at Abbot's feet, his courage gone.

For one moment Perry faltered. It seemed like fighting against fate. Why struggle to protract the inevitable—why not die, since die he must, in the arms of his loved one?

But his manhood urged him on to redoubled exertions. He tore at the earth like a madman. Then one handful clung to his fingers—it was wet—what did it mean? He shook it off and clawed frantically at the hole he had made. And then—joy! The sticky sand gave way before his hand, and as he drew back, a puff of cool, deliciously sweet air followed! He had fought his way to the outer world!

For a moment he swallowed great draughts of the blessed, life-giving air, then groped back and lifting Anita in his arms, held her face up in the draught, beseeching her in frenzied accents to live—to live for him. He was little better than a madman; but he had undergone enough to make him such, during that terrible night.

The air within the den was rapidly growing more bearable, and Luis gave signs of recovery, and soon arose at Abbot's call. Anita, too gave a faint sigh, and began to breathe more freely, while her cheek grew warmer beneath Perry's passionate kisses. Then she murmured his name and clung closer to him—their warm breath mingled—their lips met and clung together as though they would never separate. That was the young hunter's reward for his desperate struggle when all seemed lost.

The reaction came, and the trio sat before the air-hole, faint, utterly exhausted. All seemed dark without, and they knew it was not yet day. They marveled that the night had not long since passed over. It seemed as though their imprisonment had lasted an age.

As they regained their strength and courage, the trio consulted in low, guarded tones. They had no means of knowing whether the Cayguas—provided any had escaped the double peril with life—had departed, or were still lingering near. They listened, but all was still without.

"After all," muttered Luis, gloomily, "it can matter little to us. They could only kill us, and that would be better than being lost in the desert, unarmed, without food or means of procuring any. We would starve to death."

"We would not lack for food—you forget how many buffalo and deer must have been killed leaping down here. It is water that I fear the most. My throat is so parched that I can hardly speak. And you, poor darling, what must you suffer?" added Abbot, sorrowfully.

"I am thirsty, but I can bear it better than the fear of falling into the hands of that dreadful savage. It makes my flesh creep to think of his ugly looks! Let's wait until sure that they have all left," murmured Anita.

"I saw the old beast—and that was the hardest of my trials—the knowledge that I could do nothing to rid you of his company. I hope the dog has been roasted alive!"

Anita ventured a little hug at these words, and was immediately repaid with interest, and the darkness kindly concealed more than one deeply flushed face as a little report followed the reluctant parting of their lips. Ah, after all, being buried alive was not so terrible—when one believes escape is possible, and is blessed with the company of one's beloved.

Finally Luis, who had not so much to distract his thoughts as the others, declared that he could endure it no longer—that he was almost crazed with thirst. And he rapidly enlarged the hole, until it was large enough to give passage to his body. Repeatedly cautioned by Abbot, he emerged, and peered keenly around. An impressive spectacle met his gaze in the gray light of dawn, but nowhere could he detect the presence of a living form. Even then he marveled at the coolness of the air. The traces of such an extensive fire should have lingered longer than that—in heat, if nothing more. But then a low, glad cry broke from his lips as his hand rested in a hollow filled with water! And then he knew. The blessed rain!

Anita and Abbot came forth and joined him, and ten minutes later were wondering how the want of a little water could produce such acute suffering.

Making Anita re-enter the den, the young men carefully examined the barranca, and then, scaling the rocks, peered out over the dead, blackened plain. Not a living object was visible. They were alone in the desert!

Yet even this thought did not greatly subdue their spirits. They had made such a wonderful escape from death that it did not seem possible they could be reserved for a more lingering though no less certain doom. They would yet escape from the desert—never fear!

It was anything but an agreeable scene that the trio gazed upon, as they stood before the den that had so nearly proven their grave. Hundreds upon hundreds of dead bodies lay in the barranca, filling it from side to side for full twenty feet in depth. The fire had singed most of the hair and hide off of these, and the heavy rain-drops had beaten off the charred flesh, leaving the bloody, half cooked meat visible in blotches. The mass was steaming freely; the rain could not cool all that animal heat. And with the rest, scattered along the rocks were the corpses of many a Cayuga who had escaped the animals only to fall victims to the fire.

"It is horrible—beyond anything I ever dreamed possible!" murmured Anita, shudderingly. "It makes me sick—let's leave this frightful place!"

"We will soon darling," replied Abbot. "But we must

not forget what lies before us. We may be days and even weeks trying to find our way out of this desert. To start without due preparation would be suicide."

"Our preparations will be very slight," faintly smiled Anita.

"Not so. First we must see to securing a supply of this water before the sun comes out and evaporates it. Then there is food—but that lies before us. The only difficulty will be to make a choice."

"Food—eat that!" faltered Anita.

"We must," quietly replied Perry. "We must eat that or starve. We have no weapons—not even a knife, unless we can find one upon some dead Indians. We will have to eat this meat, and that without any further cooking. You must remember where we are, Anita, and continue to act like the brave, true-hearted woman you are. God knows we will have discouragement enough, without raising any among ourselves."

"Forgive me, Perry—I will try and be sensible. What is good enough for you, darling, is good enough for me."

Luis was climbing over the rocks, to search the dead Cayguas for weapons, and so failed to see the delicious bit of—What? Something awful, of course, but it's ill telling tales out of school.

Luis found several knives, but no other weapons that could be of service, unless it was one or two of the clumsy stone hatchets. And Anita, to prove how repentant she was, ate a generous slice of roasted buffalo-meat—and then asked for more! Like a singed cat, the meat was better than it looked.

It was nearly noon before they succeeded in finding a couple of large leathern flasks that would hold water. These had been protected by lying beneath several animals, and had not been injured by the fire. With a good deal of patience, these were filled from the little pools, and then, with a good supply of roasted meat slung over their shoulders, the trio emerged from the barranca and faced their long, weary journey. But it was destined to be interrupted at the very outset. An exclamation from Luis caused Anita and Perry to glance up.

Far away—almost directly before them, a moving body was visible. A few moments' scouting resolved what they were—horsemen. But who—were they friends or enemies?

"We must not run any risks—back to the barranca!" cried Abbot, as he crouched low down and retreated.

"Perhaps 'tis those dreadful men—the Red Hawks!" faltered Anita, as they scrambled down the rocks.

This was the thought that was uppermost in the minds of each. Anita concealed herself in the den, Luis and Abbot anxiously watched the party from the escarpment, taking good care not to be seen. As they drew nearer, it was evident that the majority, if not all, were white men. It must be the Red Hawks, after the Cayguas, to avenge their slaughtered comrades and their destroyed town. And thus the party wound around the barranca unhalted. It was the band of Man-hunters, led by Walter Dugrand!

CHAPTER XIX.

OLD BULL'S-EYE AS A LOVER.

Down—down! through what seemed countless miles of empty space—an aerial flight that seemed never-ending. Then a heavy shock—a mad plunging onward over an irregular surface that appeared to be heaving and tossing like the waves of the ocean—then a painful shock—a blank.

When Old Bull's-Eye returned to consciousness, he found the faithful Snow-squall standing over him, licking his face and neck, whimpering dolefully as though mourning over his dead master. But this changed to a joyful whicker, as the scout struggled to a sitting posture, and gazed wonderingly around him. What had happened?

"Ha! I remember now!" he muttered, as a low sigh drew his attention to the lithe form that lay partly in his arms. "Thank God you are alive, little one!" and he pressed his parched lips to the upturned face, as Carmela unclosed her eyes.

The fire was no longer visible. The sky was clouded, and seemed threatening rain. The darkness was intense. Eyesight availed them little, and they could only guess at the method of their escape from what seemed inevitable death.

Weak and trembling, completely exhausted by the fearful sufferings they had undergone—as much of mind as of body—Carmela and Old Bull's-Eye made no attempt to arise, content in the knowledge that their lives had been preserved and that they were still together.

His arms tightened around her lithe, yielding form, his head bowed until their cheeks touched each other, their breath mingling, yielding to a delicious languor that neither of them cared to break.

"You are mine, little one!" softly breathed Old Bull's-Eye.

"Yours, forever—if you wish—you have conquered me," Carmela replied, in low, languid accents.

Their lips met—all else was forgotten. Such moments are like a smiling oasis in the dreary desert of life.

Then the rain came down, in heavy, blinding sheets. Love, under a shower-bath, is apt to cool down, and so it was with our friends. Old Bull's-Eye unwound his arms long enough to see that his powder-horn was safe, and placed it where there was no danger of its getting wet. The cool rain was

very refreshing to their jaded, scorched persons, and served in a measure to quench their thirst. And thus the remainder of the night passed.

With the day-dawn came a knowledge of the wonderful escape they had made, and Old Bull's-Eye, wild and eventful as had been his life for years past, could scarcely believe his eyes.

That immense area lying between the Rio Gila and the Colorado river resembles in many respects that tract between the famous Cross-Timber and the Rocky Mountains, or the Llano Estacado, but in nothing so much as its rising by steps, so to speak. The traveler journeying toward the North-west meets at every hundred or hundred and twenty-five miles with a ridge of high hills extending as far as the eye can reach upon each hand. Scaling this, he naturally anticipates a corresponding descent upon the opposite side, but, in most instances, on reaching the summit he finds another broad, level expanse, stretching out beyond the range of human vision.

The mad race from the prairie fire had led Old Bull's-Eye a little south of east. The herd of animals had plunged headlong over one of these ledges, down upon the rocks, more than hundred feet below. They had been crushed to death by thousands as the mighty stream poured over, trampling and trampling down those that preceded them, until the mass of quivering, mangled carcasses came up to within twenty feet of the upper prairie. The brutes had tumbled and rolled over until a slope ended two hundred feet out from the ridge, over which the majority of the *estampados* plunged to continue their flight beyond.

This was the descent that Snow-squall had made in safety, finally stumbling at the base and casting its riders to the scored and beaten prairie. The fire had swept up to the ledge, then died out for want of fuel.

"It don't seem possible that we could have come down there, and escaped with life!" exclaimed Carmela.

"There was never another horse that could have done it! Had I not ought to be a very proud man, with my little one and noble old Snow-squall?"

"But are you?" and Carmela shot a quick glance up into the bronzed face, with a blushing shyness that, until now, had been utterly unknown to her.

Old Bull's-Eye's reply was entirely satisfactory, of course, else Snow-squall would not have whickered so approvingly, as he lifted his head from cropping the scanty grass-blades.

"Am I awake, little one?" said the scout, laughingly, at length. "I am almost afraid to speak or to touch you, for fear it will awaken me from a dream. To think that I—a rough, ugly old man—"

"Hush!" and Carmela clapped her little brown paw over the scout's bearded lips. "You belong to me now, and no one shall slander my property. You are not old—you are not ugly—but you are a man, true to the very core! My life has been a rough one, and I am almost as much man as woman. But in you I have found my master. Such as I am, I am wholly yours. The debt of gratitude, if any, is owing you."

"You are in earnest—you will be my wife, little one?"

"Yours, now and forever, my king!"

Ah! well, love is as powerful in the desert as elsewhere, and can find an abiding-place in the heart that beats under a buck-skin shirt or Indian dressed tunic, as well as beneath fine broadcloth and silken bodice.

It seems that love, hunger and thirst can exist at one and the same time, for ten minutes later the newly-pledged lovers were busily employed; Old Bull's-Eye kindling a fire, while Carmela, riding Snow-squall, went in quest of water. They were both successful, though it was a difficult task kindling a fire with such damp material. Then, side by side, they discussed love and antelope-steaks together.

Their surroundings were peculiar enough. The immense mass of bodies piled against the perpendicular ridge. The brown prairie behind them, dotted thickly with prostrate animals, alive, but helpless. Spurred on by the fire, they had sunk, completely exhausted, the moment they were beyond its power, and now lay in strange juxtaposition. Here lay stretched out a huge jaguar, its once beautiful hide scorched and blistered. Beside it was an antelope, their feet fairly touching. Wolves, panthers, wild horses, buffalo and elk were lying in every direction, unable to arise, completely exhausted, many of whom must die as they lay, from the effects of their terrible race.

"What course do you mean to follow now, Old—" began Carmela, but paused with a ludicrous air of confusion.

"I am not ashamed of the name, pet," laughed Old Bull's-Eye, "for 'twas gained honorably. But I guess you had better call me by my real name. I was christened Abel."

"I was thinking of Chiquita, and wondering whether she escaped that terrible fire," added Carmela.

"That is what I must find out. If she is living, I must meet her face to face. And—little one, you said that you did not believe she was your mother. Pray God that your suspicions may prove true—that she is nothing to you!"

"I will—if you wish it," said Carmela, simply. "But why?"

"Because—you may as well know it now, as hereafter. Little one, I fear that this Chiquita is my wife!"

Old Bull's-Eye bowed his head and moodily picked at the ground. Carmela stared at him in open-mouthed astonishment. But then she cried, sharply:

"If so, then I hope and pray that the fire burned her up!"

"Hush, pet—you may be speaking of your own mother.

This is why I say I *must* find her. If she is your mother, and my wife, as I fear, then you—well, little one, instead of a husband, you will have found a father."

"I don't understand—you can't be my father. What do you mean?" asked Carmela, slowly.

"Let it pass, now, pet. We will believe that all will come out right in the end. I don't feel like telling my story now—it's a long and unpleasant one, though you shall hear it some time. But you see now that I must not give up until I find this woman, or learn that she is dead, for from her alone—now that this Juan de Sylva, or Antone Barillo, is dead—can we learn the truth. And until I learn different I'm going to believe that you are the child Walter Dugrand is searching for."

Carmela seemed willing enough that this should be so. She had never known a father in her life, and however pleasant such a relation might be, she did not want to find one in Old Bull's-Eye. In her heart she knew that she could love him far better as a husband.

Snow-squall seemed quite recovered, and mounting him, Old Bull's-Eye rode in and out among the scattered animals, and finally found a young mustang that had regained its feet and was cropping the dampened grass greedily. It was an easy matter to secure it, and shifting saddle and bridle, Carmela was soon mounted upon its back. Though this was the first time human being had ever crossed its back, the mustang only winced slightly; the frightful race had tamed it most effectually.

Old Bull's-Eye, while examining the pile of carcasses, to see if it was possible to climb up to the upper prairie, with horses, made a joyous discovery. His trusty rifle was just peeping from beneath a dead buffalo, and extricating it, the scout found the weapon but little the worse for wear.

Provided with water and meat, the couple rode along the natural wall for several miles, finally finding a narrow trail that led up to the plain. A little tough climbing carried them up. The prairie, black as ink, stretched out before them as far as the eye could reach. There was no trail, but Old Bull's-Eye easily decided upon the course he must follow, and fixing the points well in his mind, they rode briskly forward, the young mustang behaving splendidly.

On, hour after hour; then a broad trail lay before them. Old Bull's-Eye dismounted, and closely inspected the tracks. A little exclamation drew Carmela to his side.

"Friends have passed by here, and that within the last two hours!" he said, gladly, looking up.

"How can you tell? I see that some of the horses were shod, but may it not have been the Red Hawks? I feel sure that they will follow after the Indians, as soon as they fled out what has happened at the nest."

"You see this?" and Old Bull's-Eye pointed out a peculiarly shaped track upon the dampened ashes. "I owned that horse until I found Snow-squall. Then I gave it to a friend, Murph. Toole. He was riding it three or four days ago, so I know that, since he passed here, the others are the men following Dugrand. If we can only overtake them! Come, let's try. With them we can clean out the Cayguas and rescue their captives."

Mounting again, the scouts passed rapidly along the fresh trail, Old Bull's-Eye repeating the story told him by his trapper friend, about Walter Dugrand. His language was no longer that of a rough, illiterate borderer. While with Carmela he cast off the uncouth mask he had worn so long, showing himself for what he really was, a well-bred, educated man.

"Look yonder!" suddenly exclaimed Carmela, extending her arm. "What are they? Is not that a woman, with them?"

Old Bull's-Eye, who had been regarding his pleasing comrade far more intently than the trail, now noticed a little group of human beings, far ahead, evidently dismounted in the desert.

"We'll soon see—there are only three of them," he said, urging Snow-squall forward, closely followed by Carmela.

There was no cover behind which the three wanderers could take shelter, and though they had plainly discovered the horsemen, they stood still, awaiting the result. But then, with a glad cry, one of them sprang forward, waving his arms like a madman.

"Perry Abbot, by all that's holy!" cried the scout, as he recognized the man, and soon they were grasping hands.

It was indeed Anita, Perry and Luis, who, as soon as the party of supposed Red Hawks had disappeared, left the barranca and began their long journey, following the broad trail as a guide against straying in a circle. The meeting was a glad one on all sides, for Anita, though she knew that Carmela had played the part of a spy in the tragedy at the rancho, could not forget that the spirited maiden had protected her from the insults of Red Hawk.

After a hasty discussion it was resolved to press on after the Man-hunters, partly because there would be greater safety in their company, partly because they all felt a curiosity to witness the end of the drama.

Anita was mounted upon the mustang, while the three men keeping pace on foot, they hastened along the trail. The barranca was soon reached, and while the others rode around the ravine, Old Bull's-Eye crossed over and after a little search found the trail left by the Cayguas. The ashes lay several inches deep over the surface, and, having been thoroughly moistened by the rain, which had ceased shortly before the savages had resumed their retreat, received and retained perfect impressions of every foot. And among them, the scout found one that he felt assured was that of Chiquita—long, slender, and high-arched.

The two trails came together in a short time, and it was evident that the Man-hunters had been rapidly overhauling the cannibals. The sun was not more than an hour high when Old Bull's-Eye abruptly paused and held up his hand in warning. Halting, the party listened intently. The faint sound of distant firing came to their ears. There could be only one solution.

The Man-hunters had overtaken their prey.

Old Bull's-Eye lifted Anita from the saddle and leaped upon Snow-squall's back, exclaiming:

"You follow on after—I'm going to have a hand in the fun!" and away he galloped, like a madman.

CHAPTER XX.

FACE TO FACE.

OLD BULL'S-EYE was not mistaken when he pointed out the track of the horse ridden by his old friend, Murph. Toole. The party that had passed by was indeed Dugrand's Man-hunters.

Almost immediately after the avenger fired the shot that forever ended the earthly trail of Red Jack Hawk, one of the men gave warning of the burning prairie. It was just possible that the green timber of the grove might resist the fire, but the borderers resolved not to risk that, when the matter could be so simply arranged, and the word was given to kindle fires all around the *motte*. This simple expedient proved sufficient, and the danger swept past them.

While waiting for the heated ground to cool off sufficiently, Dugrand closely questioned the captive outlaw, Dick Croghan, who declared that he could lead the party direct to the Caygua town, and would do so if his life was promised him. Convinced that the man was honest in his offer, Dugrand gladly assented, and less than half an hour later the party were riding briskly over the blackened plain, for the rain had commenced to fall, quickly extinguishing the glowing roots of the weeds and grass.

It was a forced march, but there was need of speed. Until the burnt region was passed no water could be found, while all game had either perished or been driven before the sea of fire. So, with scarce a pause, they pressed on through the remainder of that night, and after a few minutes' breathing spell for the animals, in the morning, maintained the same steady gait until nearly noon, when they reached the baranca that had served the Cayguas so poorly for shelter. Rounding this they kept on, and soon after found the trail.

"It's all that's left of 'em, boss," said Croghan, after closely examining the different footprints. "They must 'a' tuck to the hole back yender fer kiver, an' hed a beastly time of it, what w' the mad critters a-stampedin' an' the fire. You see they're all afoot—twenty-one on 'em, besides this track. It was made by a white woman, es you kin see."

Dugrand's face was pale and stern-set as he gave the word to press forward. Red Hawk had told him that both his wife and daughter were with the Cayguas, yet only one woman had passed by here. Which was it? which had fallen? Truly his feelings were not the most enviable.

They had covered but a few miles after striking the trail, when they came upon a spot where it was evident that the party they were pursuing had made quite a halt; on every side were prints of their bodies in the black ashes.

"The varmints must 'a' bin clean tuckered out, from the looks," quoth Murph. Toole. "Reckon they didn't like the idee o' stayin' longer at the ditch back yender, whar they must 'a' hed a beastly time, an' struck out fer home, but hed to stop hyar fer rest, layin' down in the muck like sick hogs."

The old trapper was right in his guess. The Cayguas had traveled this far, when their strength gave out and they were forced to rest for several hours. The fiery ordeal they had undergone had nearly killed them.

"A regular goose trail!" chuckled the trapper, as he rode beside Dugrand. "Jes' look how the varmints waddled along—like a herd o' Piute squaws ram-jammed full o' tan-gle-foot or Taos valley lightnin'! We'll hev a easy job a-knockin' 'em on the head, unless they make thar village fust."

"That hain't fur away," said Croghan, dropping back beside them. "You see them hill-p'int's, straight ahead? Look like little sand-hills, from hyar. That's whar the varmints hang out, an' a nasty place it are, too."

"We're the boys as kin take it, ef so the cap'n tells us."

They rode on briskly, now that the end seemed so near, fearing that their game would yet succeed in slipping into its hole. The blackened prairie suddenly ended. They had reached the edge of the sand desert, where there was not grass enough to support a fire. The ground too, from being an almost dead level, was now slightly undulating, the long, low sand ridges strongly resembling the swell of the ocean, in all save color.

"Ha!" what is that—on the ridge, out yonder? Quick. Toole, your eyes are sharpest!" suddenly cried Dugrand, pointing ahead.

"It's the varmints—whoo-oop!" yelled Toole, exultantly.

The order to charge was unneeded. The Man-hunters saw their game—the enemy they had ridden so hard to overtake, and with one accord they plunged spurs rowel deep into the damp flanks of their jaded animals and dashed forward at top speed, yelling and hooting like demons.

That the Cayguas had observed their pursuers was quite evident. They were running toward the distant hills with all the speed they could command, urging on the three captives in their midst. The Cayguas were "horse-Indians," and like the Comanches and those of the Apaches who inhabit the deserts, miserable pedestrians, unlike their brethren who live in the mountains, and can fairly run down the wild horse. There could be but one ending to the race, and this Shkote-nah, the giant chief knew as well as did the exultant Man-hunters. But he was no coward. If worn by an enemy, his scalp must be won.

"Look at 'em—the blamed fools mean fight!" cried Murph. Toole, derisively. "Bully for them—it'll be more fun."

The Indians had checked their flight, and now stood upon the top of a higher and steeper sand-hill than usual. The three captives were now plainly visible, being held before the Caygua. Then—a cry of horror broke from Dugrand's livid lips. He saw the captives stricken down—saw them scalped! And as the mutilated bodies were hurled down the slope, the Cayguas brandished their weapons, flaunted aloft the gory trophies and yelled loudly in defiance.

"Oh! kill them—don't let one of the murderous dogs escape!" cried Dugrand, hoarsely, as he urged his panting horse forward, plying the cruel spurs until the blood dripped from their long rowels.

On, on, until the foot of the sand-hill was reached, still on, though the horses, sinking fetlock deep in the loose sand, stumbled and fell to their knees more than once. Then, impatient at the slow progress, Dugrand sprung from the saddle, followed by his men, and charged on foot.

The rifles and pistols began to speak rapidly, and the Cayguas melted away before the hail-storm of death, plying their bows to the last. Shkote-nah, the giant, bent his buffalo-horn bow nearly double, and sent the sharp, flint-headed arrow through and through the ex Red Hawk, Dick Croghan, who dropped to the blood-stained sands without a groan. In swift succession the feathered deaths flew, and four of the assailants fell dead before a bullet brought the death-yell to the huge chief's lips. Defiant to the last, he struck fiercely at Toole with his stone hatchet, as the borderer bent over him to lift his scalp. But the old trapper nimbly eluded the stroke, and burying his long knife in the swelling chest, muttered:

"Durn sech a critter—takes more killin' than it would to kill a polecat!"

Within five minutes from the firing of the first shot, all was over, the last Caygua cut down. Yet, despite their poor weapons, the cannibals had not died unavenged. Nine of the Man-hunters had taken up the last trail while nearly a dozen others were wincing with pain as their comrades cut the arrows out of their persons.

When there were no more enemies upon whom he could wreak his vengeance, Walter Dugrand descended the hill to where the captives, who had been butchered before his very eyes, lay weltering in their gore. Chiquita lay upon her face. Gently turning her over, and composing her limbs, Dugrand gazed long and earnestly into the worn and haggard face.

Though prepared for a great change, this was more than he had expected. Could this old and worn face be the remains of the sweet, dimpled, childish face that he had loved so well? It did not seem possible.

"A sorry sight, cap'n," said a low voice, and turning, he saw Murph. Toole standing beside him. "Though I don't reckon thar's much use a-tryin', mebbe we'd better see ef we can't bring her to. They've skelped her, but it don't look like she was much hurt otherwise—the skull hain't broke, es I kin see," he added, kneeling beside the body.

"If she could speak—just one word, to solve this horrible doubt!" muttered Dugrand, agitatedly.

"We'll see—thar's no harm a-tryin', anyhow."

Toole gently lifted the woman's head and rested it upon his knee, and producing a flask of whisky, bade Dugrand use it. The stout man's hands trembled like those of a confirmed invalid, but he obeyed, bathing Chiquita's face with the liquor, and forcing a few drops down her throat. For a time it seemed labor spent in vain, but Toole would not despair, and his perseverance was rewarded by a faint, convulsive heaving of the woman's bosom.

"Give her some more o' the juice, cap'n," he eagerly muttered. "It'd fetch life back to a stone, let alone a woman."

Forcing open the tightly-clinched teeth, Dugrand poured a little of the fiery liquid out of the flask, and Chiquita struggled and coughed feebly as it passed down her throat. And then her eyes opened, filled with a look of horror, that gradually vanished as she evidently recognized the face of a white man.

"You—you are not my Marie?" faltered Dugrand, striving in vain to subdue the emotion that almost overpowered him. "Tell me—who are you?" he added, as the woman tried to arise.

"I am Chiquita—I don't know you—nor any Marie," was the slow reply, as the woman gazed steadily into his face.

"Try to think—are you not Marie Dugrand—didn't Jack Hawk steal you away from your husband?"

"'Twas Antone Barillo—the coward—the traitor!" cried Chiquita, fiercely, rising to a sitting posture.

"Hurray! thar comes Old Bull's-Eye!" cried Murph. Toole, as, thus relieved, he sprung to his feet as a horseman came dashing up. "Jest in time to be too late, old man!"

"She's not dead—don't tell me that!" hoarsely replied the scout, as he leaped from Snow-squall's back and strode toward the little group, his face pale as a ghost's.

"Ge-thunder! him, too—wonder how many more fellers is goin' crazy over the woman! A humbly old witch, too," disgustedly uttered the veteran, renewing his quid.

A sharp cry caused him to turn abruptly. Chiquita had covered her face with her hands and seemed cowering before the scout, who stood as if transfixed. But then the woman removed her hands and raised her head, an evil light filling her eyes. She seemed to have forgotten her wounds. The vague expression of pain and terror had left her face.

"You are Dolores Vermillye—my wife," at length uttered Old Bull's-Eye, his voice sounding strained and unnatural.

"I was, once; though if I did not know that I am dying, I'd deny it," coldly replied the woman. "I only regret that I cannot see you die first. I have ever hated you, but never more than at this moment—"

"Dolores, where is my child—my little daughter?"

"Dead—dead! The cannibals killed and ate her—ha ha!" and laughing wildly, the woman sunk back, as if dead.

Dugrand used the whisky-flask freely, but his efforts were in vain for some time. Old Bull's-Eye turned sadly to greet Carmela and Anita, who had just arrived riding double, when a sharp cry from the lips of Chiquita startled them. She was sitting up, her face horribly distorted, her eyes widely distended.

"Carmela—Abel, husband—forgive! She is your child—Carmela, come— Ah, Heaven have mercy!"

Her head sunk back. She was dead.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CANNIBALS' STRONGHOLD.

To at least three hearts the dying words of Chiquita proved a bitter blow. Dugrand had hoped to find at least a daughter. Though Old Bull's-Eye had found the child for whom he had hunted through many a long, weary year, and Carmela had found the father she had often speculated about, the relationship seemed a tame and unsatisfactory one after "what might have been," only for this death-bed revelation.

"Well, little one," said Old Bull's-Eye, soberly, "you'll have to make the best of it. Your life hasn't been much the better for a father thus far, but, please God, I'll try to make amends."

Carmela received his embrace quietly, but her face was pale and her lips quivered. However, it was but natural that she should be affected by this strange finding of a parent.

Old Bull's-Eye, assisted by Perry, Luis, Toole and others, soon scooped out a grave in the soft sand, and all that was mortal of Chiquita—or Dolores Vermillye—was soon hidden from view. The scout bowed over the rude grave for a few moments, and may have breathed a silent prayer, but none was uttered audibly. Nor was there a tear dropped as the party turned away. A strange life she had led—a strange burial was hers.

"What's the next move, cap'n?" suddenly asked Murph. Toole, addressing Dugrand, who was squatted upon the sand in moody meditation.

"I don't know—our work is done here," was the sharp reply. "I suppose we'll have to take the back track."

"It's a long way to water, that-a-way, boss. I don't reckon our critters kin stand more'n one more day 'thout drink."

"What can we do? Do you expect me to call up a lake or river here in the very heart of the desert?" snarled Dugrand.

"Thar's water yender, a plenty. Ef you say the word, cap'n, we'll go an' help ourselves," quickly replied Toole.

"What do you mean? Speak out plain, man."

"All right, boss. Thar, 'mong them hills yender, is whar the kin o' these critters," coolly nodding toward the dead Cayguas, "hang out. In course they must hev water, which is jest what we want, the wust way, an' so the boys thinks the best we kin do is to clean out the red niggers right off."

"It may not be so easy; but I'm agreeable. We do need water, and I don't know where we can find it short of the motts where we ambushed the Red Hawks, unless we do try these rascals. It may be tough work, but we're used to that. Hallo, there, boys!" he added, raising his voice. "This fellow here says you're burning for a chance at the red-skins yonder. Is it so?"

The answer came as with one voice; Murph. Toole had exactly expressed their wishes. They had not forgotten the marvelous tales told by the outlaw, Dick Croghan, during the past day and night, of the great stores of gold that the Cayguas had amassed. He declared that, in the little basin where the cannibal village stood, gold lay around in nuggets common as the sands of the desert—that the very walls of their lodges were built of the precious metal. And, though they affected to laugh at and ridicule the stories, the wonder-loving bordermen confidently expected to reap a rich harvest of plunder.

"What do you think of this move?" Perry Abbott asked Old Bull's-Eye, as they plodded along through the fast-deepening shades of night.

"It's the best thing we can do, 'or, though we will be apt to see some tough fighting, we must have water, and that soon. I don't believe one-half of us could live through the trip back to the nearest water-hole. It was always scarce enough, but

this big fire has licked up every drop as far as it went—which is hundreds of miles, I take it."

It was barely possible that the brief fight with Shkote-nah had passed unnoticed by the Cayguas at the village, and acting upon this supposition, the Man-hunters pressed on in hopes of effecting a complete surprise. They did not know how strong a force they would have to face, but with reckless daring paused not to count that chance. They knew that they must win their way to the springs of the basins, or perish of thirst in the desert. There was no alternative.

The distance proved deceptive, the traveling difficult and laborious, and their horses being jaded, the eastern horizon was already growing gray when they reached the circle of vegetation that surrounded the low hills. The gray rocks frowned down upon them, but all was silent. Not a sound stirred the air save as the horses greedily cropped the short grass, while Toole and Old Bull's-Eye advanced to reconnoiter.

They soon returned. Nothing suspicious had been seen or heard. They had discovered a pass that appeared to lead into the basin, and had examined it for some little distance. It was practicable for horsemen, but an enemy, if upon the alert, could inflict terrible damage upon any who attempted to follow the pass, by hurling rocks from the heights above.

"It may be that they haven't seen us, but to make sure, I will go ahead on foot, with a couple of good men, and if there is any ambush, we will be apt to spring it," said the scout.

"Very well—choose your men," briefly replied Dugrand.

"Murph. Toole for one—he can pick out another," said Old Bull's-Eye, passing back to where Carmela and Anita were. "You girls must keep back here out of danger. You look after them, Abbot."

"I'm going with you," quietly, but firmly uttered Carmela.

"You must not—there, don't put on that look, little one. Remember I have the right to command your obedience now, since I am your father. You will stay?"

"If you say I must," pouted the maiden.

Old Bull's-Eye kissed her tenderly, and then hastened away. He, with Toole and another, looked to their rifles and entered the pass. This was narrow, scarcely affording room for two horsemen to pass abreast, the sides nearly perpendicular for fifty feet, then breaking into a thousand cracks and crevices, affording good cover for a thousand men, if need be. If the Cayguas had observed the pale-faces, it would be difficult dislodging them.

Silently as specters the three scouts glided along the dark pass, keenly peering above their heads at the rocks, which, receiving the light of dawn earlier, were much lighter than below. Some minutes nothing suspicious was observed, and Old Bull's-Eye was about to give the agreed-upon signal telling the Man-hunters to advance, when an Indian almost directly above his head, exposed his upper body, peering out at the motionless body of horsemen beyond. Quick as thought the scout's rifle spoke, and the sharp report was blended with a shrill death-shriek as the stricken Caygua came tumbling headlong from his perch. And then, with a noise as though the very hills were being overthrown by an earthquake, rocks and boulders came crashing down into the pass, hurled by invisible hands.

More by good fortune than any exercise of skill upon their part, the whites escaped injury, from the rocky avalanche, and seeing how vain would be the attempt to hold their position under the circumstances, Old Bull's-Eye gave the word to retreat. Favored by the shadows, this was successfully executed and the main body regained.

"We can charge through there," exclaimed Dugrand.

"And get rubbed out—the biggest half of us. No, there's only one way, that I see," quietly replied Old Bull's-Eye. "Pick out twenty of your best shots. Give me half of them, let the others follow Murph. Toole. We'll take to the rocks, the varmints won't do much stone throwing. We can pick off every one that shows his head, and you can ride through the pass without any trouble."

The plan seemed feasible, and no one could offer a better one, so the selection was made, and the two parties of skirmishers began scaling the steep sides of the hills, taking advantage of every point of cover, their rifles and revolvers ready for the deadly work before them.

Though the Cayguas must have noted and understood the movement, not a brave could be seen. The hills seemed deserted and undefended. But then—a sharp cry came from one of Toole's party, and, a feathered shaft quivering deep in his breast, the unfortunate borderer toppled over and fell, rebounding from point to point, pausing at last upon the rock floor of the pass, a dead, mangled heap of mortality.

The breath had scarce left his body before he was avenged. And then the sharp twanging of bowstrings, the rapid detonations of rifles and revolvers were mingled with the shrill yell and defiant cheer. The rock fight was fairly opened.

Captain Dugrand was not a man to allow such a favorable moment to pass unimproved, and gave the word to advance, leading the way. The pass was so narrow that they were forced to keep single file, and pressed their animals to the highest rate of speed the poor brutes were capable of. Near the center of the line rode Anita and Carmela, guarded by Luis and Perry.

Fortunate was it that the Cayguas were so fully occupied by the sharpshooters above, else with thousands of loose boulders and fragments of rock that lay thickly scattered along the ledges, they could have annihilated the slender column below.

Dugrand, as he neared the further end of the defile, caught

a glimpse of several savages, lurking behind the rocks, evidently resolved to dispute his passage. Shouting back a warning, he dashed boldly on, and the next moment found himself in the midst of two score brawny warriors. Right and left his pistols sent their death-warrants, and a moment later he was nobly seconded by half a score of his own men.

The Cayguas fought desperately, but their primitive weapons were no match for the many-tongued revolvers, and they fell before the uninterrupted blaze of fire like ripe grain before the reaper's sickle. The struggle scarce occupied one minute, before the scanty remnant of Cayguas broke and fled, leaving two-thirds of their number dead or dying. Not entirely unavenged. Though Dugrand had scarcely received a scratch, four of his men had fallen, dead.

"Follow me, lads!" he shouted. "Look at the hounds—setting fire to their houses!"

Before them lay a circular valley, almost basin-like, gradually sloping from every side toward the center, where glistened a good-sized pond of water. Around this were dozens of neat huts, composed of skins and light poles. The Cayguas were now hastily setting fire to these, while a number of squaws and children were fleeing rapidly away, toward the hills. And then, this work of destruction well under way, the Cayguas retreated, covering their women and children with sullen bravery that commanded the admiration of even the sternest Indian-hater among the Man-hunters. Yet this did not prevent them from pressing the savages hotly, and it was not until the basin was almost crossed that the fight ceased. Then, seeing their women safe among the rocky hills, the braves broke and fled. The whites did not care to follow, just then. For once they had their fill of fighting, and hastened back to the silver pond, where men and horses quenched their thirst together.

Meanwhile Old Bull's-Eye had his hands full. The Cayguas were snugly ensconced among the rocks, and were adepts in the peculiar warfare. But the quick eye and unerring aim of the plainsmen marked down every red-skin that showed himself, and when, from the sounds beyond, the Cayguas knew that the whites had forced their way into the basin, they abandoned the uneven contest. Darting from rock to rock, perfectly familiar with every inch of the ground, the savages effected the retreat without the loss of another brave.

Half an hour later, the sharp-shooters rejoined their friends at the pond.

In one of the huts that had escaped the conflagration, a quantity of dried horse-flesh was found, and, in default of better food, furnished a meal for the invaders. Anita and Carmela gladly entered this and were soon oblivious to all their troubles, locked in a deep and refreshing sleep, guarded by three devoted sentinels, nor did they wake until nearly sunset.

It was resolved to remain in the cannibals' stronghold until the next day, when the horses would have recovered their wind, strength and spirits. Through the day the majority of the men slept, a few remaining on guard, lest the Cayguas should attempt to drive the invaders away; but that night nearly every man was upon the alert, weapons in hands. All lights were extinguished. The horses were hobbled and tied near the pond.

The hours wore on, yet no sound came from the hills. Day-dawn approached—and then!

Loud and clear echoed forth the wild war-cry of the cannibals—a flight of arrows swept through the camp—and the next moment it was a deadly struggle, hand to hand.

CHAPTER XXII.

A LEAF FROM THE PAST.

BUT the attack had been expected, and the Cayguas found the pale-faces ready for them. Snatching up a brand that had been carefully buried beneath ashes to keep it alive, Old Bull's-Eye whirled it swiftly around his head until the stick burst into a strong blaze, when he thrust it into the pile of combustibles that had been saturated with oil and grease for this very purpose. Rapidly igniting, the pile flamed up furiously, casting a lurid glow through the entire village, revealing every form with the distinctness of noonday.

Desperately brave and reckless as the Cayguas were, they could not long face those terrible weapons whose black muzzles vomited forth death without intermission. With only flint-headed arrows and stone tomahawks to match these, the wonder was that they did not retreat before.

The loud warning voices of Old Bull's-Eye and Dugrand called the plainsmen back as they pressed recklessly after the cannibals, and happily they were obeyed. Among the ravines and broken hills, unfamiliar with the natural traps and pitfalls, the Man-hunters would have been at the mercy of the Cayguas.

Rifle in hands, they kept close guard during the short time before the rising of the sun, but the Cayguas did not return to the attack.

Twenty hours in the midst of plenty had made new animals of the horses, and when day dawned there was little doubt as to their fitness for the long, dreary back trail. Nor were the men loth to leave the basin. From the time when they had quenched their thirst, until the sun sunk from view, they had searched eagerly for the golden treasures spoken of by Dick

Croghan, but without success. A few rude ornaments were found upon the limbs of the fallen braves, but nothing more.

Securing a good supply of water, the party slowly filed from the basin, and, pausing long enough upon the edge of the desert for Old Bull's-Eye and the others who had volunteered to keep the ledges above the pass clear of enemies, trotted briskly away from the home of the Cayguas.

During that day's ride, Old Bull's-Eye seemed to avoid Carmela, and acted more like the wild, reckless borderer the young hunters had first known. In truth he was anything but happy. The dark, glowing beauty of Carmela, her fearlessness during the trials and perils of the trail, had won upon him until he found himself almost worshipping her. And then, after her confessing that his love was reciprocated, after declaring that she would be his, wholly and entirely, to find that his promised wife was his daughter—that was a bitter blow.

Carmela, too, did not seem her usual self, but rode along quietly and subdued, and though her eyes followed every motion of the plainsman, she made no effort to join him, or to speak unless he first addressed her.

Luis de Silva kept close by her side, and both Anita and Perry smiled significantly at each other, as they noted his devotion. They believed that another match would grow out of this desert adventure—or chain of adventures.

That night they encamped upon the bare, blackened prairie. After the rude meal of cold "roast horse" and water from the skins, Old Bull's-Eye lighted his pipe, and, lying at Carmela's feet, with Anita, Perry, Luis and Dugrand grouped around, he lifted the veil from the past, and read this page of heart history:

"My name is Abel Vermillye. Father died when I was eighteen, and left me the richest man in Virginia—indeed, I had no idea how rich I was until my lawyer almost forced me to look over the mass of papers—mortgages, notes, due-bills and the like—with which his office was nearly filled. Among these papers was a mortgage, overdue, upon the plantation of one Vincent Ventura. I was young, thoughtless, and fond of pleasure, and naturally I soon shifted the burden upon his shoulders, bidding him continue to act as though father was still alive.

"I accepted the invitation of a young friend and paid him a long visit. While there, I met and was introduced to Dolores Ventura—the same woman whom you assisted me to bury, back yonder. She was very different, then. Tall, superbly formed, graceful and lithe as a panther, I never beheld a more dazzling beauty—a woman for whom a man might almost sell his soul to perdition, and still think himself the gainer. She was several years older than I, but that, I thought, was a trifle.

"Well, I fell in love with her. It was a mad, unreasoning passion. If another man looked upon her with admiring eyes—and who could help it, then?—my blood fairly boiled, and I could scarce refrain from insulting him. Don Ventura received me cordially—and within a week I was an inmate of his house. Dolores seemed very changeable—but there! I will cut it short.

"I asked Senor Ventura if I might aspire to her hand. His answer was to the point. He reminded me of the mortgage that I held upon his place. If I would agree to cancel that, as Dolores' dower, he would consent. Need I say that I agreed?

"That night I fancied myself in heaven. Dolores had consented to be mine. I must have been blind as a bat, not to have seen that, instead of loving, she actually loathed me. I did not know that her father had forced her to smile upon me, to lure me on to a proposal—though that was little needed—to accept me when her whole heart was given to another. He knew that in my marrying her lay his only hope of escaping ruin. My lawyer was about to foreclose the mortgage, which covered his entire property.

"Well, we were married, and I was in a fool's paradise for nearly a year, though Dolores was cold and unsympathetic. But that I believed was her nature. Then a daughter was given to us—you, Carmela. After this, Dolores seemed happier, and I really believed that she would have learned to love me as truly as I did her, in time, had not she crossed our path.

"You were a year old, Carmela, when I first met Antone Barillo. I did not know, then, that he and Dolores had ever met. But they had—he was the man whom she loved when she married me. At her marriage, he had left the country; but an evil fate drove him to return.

"You can guess the rest. The old love was awakened, and one morning I awoke to real life—Dolores was gone, taking my child with her, leaving no trail behind them.

"I went to Ventura, and then he told me the whole truth—how I had been deceived from the very first. That was the last I remember for years. When I awoke, I was in a lunatic asylum. Seven years of my life were a blank!

"It would weary you to tell of my wanderings after I recovered my senses. I changed my property into money, and took up the trail, searching in the Old World as well as the New, but never finding any traces of those I sought.

"The story told me by Ventura had wrought a great change. I did not care about finding Dolores, only that by doing so I could regain my child. My love for her was dead—I only wanted my child and to be avenged upon him.

"Finally I learned that Antone Barillo had been seen in Santa Fe, but I could learn nothing more. I came out here, and from that day to this I have lived in the West, becoming infatuated with the wild life, though I gradually gave up all

Old Bull's-Eye.

hope of finding my child. Then I heard of Red Hawk, and of a strange woman whom he had with him. While hunting for him, I made the acquaintance of an old priest, and a word that he carelessly let drop, made me believe that Don Juan de Sylva was none other than the Antone Barillo for whom I had searched so long. But he would say no more, question and threaten as I might. The seal of confession was upon his lips.

"I set out for the Rancho de Sylva, and upon the trail met you, Luis and Abbot. After that, you all know what happened. I found Dolores—and she gave me back my child. Carmela, you will love me better than your mother did?"

"Better than life, father!" impulsively cried the maiden, as she bent forward and kissed the scout's brow.

Luis sighed enviously. He was thinking how sweet it must be to receive a caress from such lips.

The march was resumed long before day-dawn, and kept up without a break, save for an hour's rest at noon. They were eager to reach the grove of trees that surrounded the spring where the Red Hawks had found the end of their earthly trail.

Old Bull's-Eye kept close beside Carmela, greatly to Luis' disgust, who found that the maiden turned a cold ear to his flattering speeches. He would have a hard task in winning the proud beauty, who had not yet forgotten the lessons of Chiquita. The scout was pleased to see this, for he still believed that the father of Luis was none other than the Antone Barillo who had eloped with Dolores, and caused him so much suffering.

It was after dark before they crossed the swell from which the *motte* could first be seen, and Old Bull's-Eye, who was in front, acting as guide, halted abruptly. A small point of light was visible, shining through the foliage. The grove was already occupied.

"Remain here until I come back. I'll soon find out who they are," muttered the scout, as he dismounted and glided rapidly forward.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE END OF A WEARY TRAIL.

OLD BULL'S-EYE quickly gained the edge of the *motte*, undiscovered, and pausing, listened intently. The subdued sound of human voices came to his ear, and he knew that a considerable force must occupy the timber. Prostrating himself, he crawled cautiously forward, passing through the line of undergrowth, soon reaching a point from whence he could look out upon the glade.

Several fires were blazing here, around which were gathered a number of men, picturesquely garbed, for the most part occupied in roasting meat. Old Bull's-Eye had little difficulty in determining their nationality—their faces, their peculiar dress, could not be mistaken. They were, for the most part, Mexicans, though with a sprinkling of half-breeds and Indians. Though it was a motley crowd, Old Bull's-Eye felt satisfied that they were, as times went, an honest gathering, and so boldly stepped out into the full glow of the firelight.

This abrupt appearance created considerable excitement, many of the Mexicans springing toward their weapons as though anticipating an immediate attack, though the majority contented themselves with curiously eying the intruder.

"Take it easy, senors," quietly observed Old Bull's-Eye, holding up his open palm toward the flustered Mexicans. "I don't take my ammunition in that way, if it's all the same to you."

"Who are you, senor, and what may be your business with us?" demanded a diminutive, monkey-like Mexican, with an air of authority, clapping one hand upon the hilt of a saber that nearly equaled himself in length.

"My name's Old Bull's-Eye. I came—"

The scout's speech was cut short by the storm of quick exclamations that arose from every side, and the men crowded around as though viewing some wonderfully rare specimen of art. Old Bull's-Eye involuntarily clutched his pistols, but then laughed shortly, as one of the men, a tall Texan, explained.

"Don't draw on your friends, boss—the boys only feels a little curious to see the man what b'ars that name."

"All right, friend—but I don't like to be crowded. A man's a man, long as he behaves himself, and I'm nothing more. But it don't suit me to be made a show of."

"You hear, fellers? Show your p'liteness—don't act like durned or nary gumpheads at a pinny-pinny-poppy-show fer the first time," cried the tall Texan, sharply.

"Thank you, friend," resumed Old Bull's-Eye. "Now tell me—who heads this outfit, and what kind of game you're hunting in these parts?"

"Two-legged game—both sorts—red an' white. It's a sorter mixed-up job, an' I can't say as I raily understand it myself. You see, a lot o' cut-throats kem down on old de Sylva's rancho—"

"What! you're hunting for him—for Juan de Sylva?" excitedly interrupted Old Bull's-Eye.

"No, I can't say as we be," was the provokingly deliberate reply. "But, look yar, old man, 'scuse my durned forgetfulness. Take a snort—to better 'quaintance," and the borderer produced a goodly-sized leather flask. "It's good stuff—ginewine Taos lightnin' as'd scorch the hair off'n a brass monkey. Drink hearty, an' may you never hev a wus friend than Jack Hardy—which is me."

Old Bull's-Eye swallowed his impatience together with a good dose of the fiery liquor, then added, as coolly as he could.

"I know a little about that business. Red Hawk's gang did the work. You seem to have struck the right trail, but you come too late for the fun. Perhaps you noticed a few bones scattered around this place—if the fire didn't burn 'em up. Right here Red Hawk was rubbed out, together with nearly every one of his outfit."

"Gee-thunder!" was all that Jack Hardy could ejaculate.

"Fact. Walt Dugrand's boys laid 'em out. But look here. You didn't answer me—who commands this outfit?"

"The old man—de Sylva, my boss as was, before the muss at the rancho. I was one o' the herders, an' though I got laid out with som'ers nigh a bushel o' lead in my karkidge, I managed to crawl away, an' giv' the alarm. Three days a'ter we got together a wheen o' fellers—these 'uns as you see—an' tuck the trail. We found whar the Red Hawks hed hed thar nest, but 'twas gone up, then. While lookin' fer sign, to tell jest what had happined, we found what looked like a dead man 'mong the brush on the hill. 'Twas none other than the old man—de Sylva. We doctored him the best we knowed how, an' I reckon that with rest an' good nussin' an' plenty of it, he'd git over his hurts. But when he came to, he acted jest like a crazy bedbug, a callin' fer his da'ter an' sich like. We couldn't do nothin' with him. Though he warn't much better than a dead man, he would ge 'long o' us—"

"Where is he?—take me to him—quick!" grater Old Bull's-Eye, unable longer to control himself. "I've hunted him for a lifetime—I must see him, at once. Where is he—the man you call Juan de Sylva?"

"I am here. Who calls Juan de Sylva?" demanded a proud, though feeble tone, from beneath a bush not far distant.

Old Bull's-Eye turned quickly, and caught sight of a figure just rising to a sitting posture. Catching up a blazing brand, he sprung forward and held the stick so that the light shone fairly upon the speaker's features. They were pale and ghastly, worn and emaciated, the sunken eyes burning with an unnatural luster.

De Sylva—for it was indeed the ranchero—returned the scout's gaze with one of mingled surprise and anger, but this quickly changed to an expression of horror. His lips parted, but he could not speak. His teeth chattered, his wasted frame trembled like a leaf.

The recognition was mutual. Old Bull's-Eye saw before him the man who had wronged him so terribly—who had made him an outcast and wanderer upon the face of the earth—the man whom he had sought through so many long, weary years.

"At last, Antone Barillo—at last!"

The words sounded like a death-knell. With a low, inarticulate cry, the wretched ranchero strove to arise, but then he fell back, his face livid, a bloody froth gathering upon his lips. It seemed as though the hand of death was upon him.

Old Bull's-Eye dropped the torch and bent forward, his face white with a terrible hatred.

"Antone Barillo—thief, murderer! where are my wife and child? Speak, or by the God above! I will tear your false heart out with my naked hands! Speak—"

"Kinder easy, pard," interposed Jack Hardy, laying one hand upon the maddened man's shoulder. "Don't you see—"

With a howl of fury, Old Bull's-Eye whirled around and dealt the tall Texan a terrible blow full in the face, that hurled him headlong into one of the fires, where he lay, quivering and bleeding like a stuck pig.

Instantly a yell of anger arose, and the men sprung forward to avenge their comrade, though not comprehending what the sudden fracas was about. Hardy rolled out of the fire, and staggering to his feet, gazed bewilderedly around.

Old Bull's-Eye saw the crowd springing toward him, and it seemed to set him wild. Drawing his pistols, he discharged them in rapid succession, yelling and cursing like a very fiend. And now his widespread celebrity stood him in good stead, for the entire party seemed afraid to close upon him, so long as he held those terrible weapons in his hands.

Jack Hardy brushed the mingled blood and ashes from his eyes, and then, catching sight of Old Bull's-Eye, whipped forth a huge knife and staggered forward. As the scout was busied with the enemy in front, he knew naught of his danger, and the glittering blade was already raised above his back, when a sharp report came from the outer circle, and the big Texan fell back, without a groan, a bullet-hole in his forehead.

The next instant a lithe figure flashed across the glade and stood before Old Bull's-Eye. It was Carmela, her face aglow, a still smoking revolver clasped in her right hand. Her aim had saved the scout's life.

"Hold!" cried a loud, commanding voice. "You are surrounded—the man who lifts another weapon dies!"

The Mexicans, startled by the unexpected summons, faltered and seemed uncertain what course to pursue, but as Dugrand and his men stepped forward and covered them with their rifles and revolvers, they dropped their arms and begged for mercy.

The sudden appearance of Carmela seemed to restore Old Bull's-Eye to his senses, and he stood quiet, one arm around the daring maiden, while Dugrand saw to the disarming of the Mexicans. Then Luis de Sylva hastily approached:

"What is this, friend? They tell me that my father was in command of this party?"

Old Bull's-Eye turned and pointed toward the motionless figure lying beneath the bush. With a cry of horror, Luis sprung to his side, but started back as he noticed the blood-froth.

"You have murdered him!" he cried, turning fiercely upon the scout. "What had he done?—but I will avenge him!"

"Don't threaten me, boy," coldly replied Old Bull's-Eye. "I have not laid a finger upon that man. But if the hand of God has not stricken him down, he must answer to me for a heavy score. He is my game, and I will kill the first and every person that attempts to interfere with my vengeance."

"The man is not dead," said Dugrand. "He was only swooned. Stand aside and give him air."

"Father! dead—dead!" shrieked Anita, struggling to free herself from Abbot's grasp, as they moved the body toward one of the fires. "Mother of Jesus! pity me!"

"Look! he opens his eyes," muttered Dugrand, after several moments, during which he was busied with the patient.

"Antone Barillo, give me back my child!" grated Old Bull's-Eye, bending over the Spaniard, whose gaze was riveted upon Anita.

"There she is—I swear it, by my hope of mercy hereafter!" As he uttered these words, gaspingly, he pointed to Anita.

CHAPTER XXIV.

OLD BULL'S-EYE'S REWARD.

THIS announcement fell upon the ears of Juan de Sylva's hearers with the force of a thunder-clap. They stood as though petrified, interchanging glances of wondering doubt.

"You doubt me," added de Sylva—or rather Antone Barillo, as he must hereafter be termed—faintly; "you think I am deceiving you. The time for that is past. I am dying—I feel a dull, heavy dropping inside—I will be a corpse before another sun. 'Tis that wound—there is a bullet in my lungs, but I could not give way while she was in the hands of those devils. But now she is free—and I repeat it, Abel Vermillye, Anita, the darling whom I have taught to call me father, is your child—the babe that your wife, Dolores, carried with her when she eloped with me."

"She your child—then what am I?" faltered Carmela, as she drew a little away from the scout's side.

"Pray that his words may be true, little one—for then you can be my wife," were Old Bull's-Eye's words, as he drew the maiden to his side again, his strong arm holding her firmly and tenderly.

"Father," said Luis, who was supporting the wounded man's head, "you must not try to speak now—you are killing yourself—wait until a more favorable moment."

"No, my boy—for you, at least, are my son—no; I must speak out while I can. I can feel the blood creeping up—soon 'twill suffocate me. Nay, don't weep—be a man. I am not afraid to die—what is it but a long, dreamless sleep, after all? Nothing—nothing more."

His speech was interrupted by a violent fit of coughing, which was ended by ejecting a quantity of blood. He smiled faintly as the spasm subsided. He knew as well as they that his hours were numbered, and motioned aside the proffered water.

"Give me brandy—whisky—anything that will sustain me while I can clear my conscience," he gasped, and fairly drained a leathern flask of fiery liquor.

His confession, if such it may be termed, was a long one, interrupted by frequent spasms, during each of which it seemed as though death must come to his relief, but by plentiful use of liquor, he would as often rally and continue his statement. Naturally there was much repetition and irrelevant matter, and the reader would be worried were his words literally recorded. The substance will suffice for a proper understanding of what may yet be clouded.

Antone Barillo and Dolores Ventura had been engaged to each other nearly a year before Abel Vermillye made his appearance, but Vincent Ventura saw that his only hope of averting utter ruin, lay in wedding his daughter to Abel, and so forbade Barillo the house, forcing his daughter to smile upon the rich young planter. He was a stern man, and Dolores had always been accustomed to bow to his will. She did so in this case, and told Barillo that they must part forever. He finally accepted this fiat, and left the country. Dolores married Vermillye, though hating him with all her fiery, intense nature, until little Anita—or Esther, as Abel called her then—came to make peace between husband and wife. 'Twas at this time that Barillo, unable longer to fight his passion, returned, and found an opportunity to meet Dolores in secret. That interview sealed the future of all; and from that day on, Dolores's hatred for her husband increased, until at last she fled with Barillo.

What followed can easily be imagined. Dolores was of an intensely jealous disposition,

and far from being the angel that Barillo had pictured her when denied him. And day by day his love for her cooled, until, after an unusually stormy scene, he abandoned her, taking with him the child, who had wound herself firmly round his heart.

From that day on, until the burning of his rancho, Barillo did not meet her nor hear anything of Dolores. He went to Spain, and there married a high-born lady—a widow, with one son: Luis. Then he returned, and started a cattle rancho. His wife died. He raised Anita and Luis in the belief that he was their father—that they were twins.

"That is all—and I call upon the Blessed Virgin to witness the truth of what I have said. She is your daughter—my darling Anita, and may—"

The man's speech was abruptly checked by another violent spasm of coughing, and rolling over, a stream of blood flowed from his mouth—and with it went out his life.

An hour later the senseless clay was placed into a shallow grave, and with uncovered head, Old Bull's-Eye said:

"May the Good God rest his soul, and forgive him as freely and completely as I do. Amen!"

The loose earth was pushed back, the body hidden from mortal eyes. And kneeling side by side, Anita and Luis prayed silently for the eternal repose of the soul of him whom they had so long regarded as their father. And their tears bedewed his humble grave.

"But Chiquita—your wife, I mean—declared that I was your child," said Carmela, hesitatingly.

It was late at night, but none of those in whom we have been more immediately interested, could compose themselves to sleep after the exciting events, and Old Bull's-Eye had drawn Carmela aside from the rest.

"She did, I know, at first, and I thought that was what she meant just before she died, when she said—'there is your child!' But you and Anita were together—I believe now that it was Anita she meant, not you. Then there is her treatment of you—you told me you did not believe she was your mother. Barillo seemed sincere in his confession, and he swore that Anita was my child. I believe he spoke the truth. My heart told me from the first that you could not be my child."

"Then I—I only find a father to lose him," half laughed Carmela. "I am nobody, then, it seems!"

"I believe, before God, that you are my daughter!" said a deep, emotional voice, as Walter Dugrand came forward. "I have no proof save what I find in my heart, but, Carmela, if you will, there is a home and a father's love awaiting you—will you accept it?"

"You hear what he says, little one? I believe he is your father. If you can think so, perhaps his is the best right."

"Do you want me to go with him?" exclaimed the girl, breathing quickly.

"No—I don't—I can't say that! You promised to be mine—you whispered that you loved me, when we expected death together at every moment—my right is better than his. Little one, will you repeat those words now?"

"Yes—and more! I am yours—yours only and forever!" murmured Carmela, and her arms wound around his neck, her lithe form quivered in a close embrace as his eager lips met hers in a long, lingering kiss of passionate love.

And this was Old Bull's-Eye's reward.

A few more words, and my story is done.

The party passed the desert in safety, and finally reached Santa Fe. There occurred a double wedding, solemnized by Father Ignacio, the very priest who had inadvertently put Old Bull's-Eye upon the right trail. And, learning what had occurred, he settled all doubts by declaring that Anita was indeed the child of Dolores Vermillye. He had long been a friend of Antone Barillo, and had, in fact, advised him to take the child with him in his flight, for Dolores was not a proper guardian. Thus, all doubts set at rest, Old Bull's-Eye wedded Carmela, while Anita made Perry Abbot happy. Then in company with Walter Dugrand, they returned to the States, and, reclaiming his plantation, Old Bull's-Eye, the Lightning Shot of the Plains, became once more Abel Vermillye, the quiet planter.

Walter Dugrand still persisted in regarding Carmela as his daughter, and settled down beside them, willing all his property to her when he died.

Luis Barillo rebuilt his rancho, for and many years carried on the business of cattle raiser, and his children have succeeded him.

As for the rest of those who have figured in this story, they have scattered far and wide, no one knows where.

But throughout the far South-west, there may still be heard occasional mention of "OLD BULL'S-EYE, THE LIGHTNING SHOT OF THE PLAINS."

THE END.

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